

# Sports Illustrated

“

He turns 31 on Dec. 30 and has already logged more minutes than Magic or Larry Bird, but instead of pacing

## LeBron James

***Is pushing.***

“The most important thing in his life is winning a championship here,” says his GM. “He is consumed by it.”

**By Lee Jenkins**

**P. 28**



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# LINEUP

12.7.15

2015 | VOLUME 123 | NO. 22

SI has regional covers this week:  
Todd Rosenberg for Sports Illustrated (James);  
Jamie Schwabero for Sports Illustrated (Brock Osweiler)

## Features

PRO BASKETBALL

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The King won't be satisfied until he has won what the Warriors took from him

By Lee Jenkins

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### BACKUP QBs »

Every coach worries whether his is ready, eyeing the inevitable day when the starting quarterback goes down

By Austin Murphy

• RANKING THE BACKUPS

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### 3-on-3

What's not to love about the NHL's mesmerizing new overtime format?

By Alex Prewitt

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

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### Keenan Reynolds

Running the triple option with aplomb, the Navy QB is a touchdown maker for the ages

By Ben Reiter

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### Jason Witten

No amount of pain can keep the Cowboys' tight end from taking the field

By S.L. Price

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*Dan Patrick:*  
Bill Simmons defers to Ben Simmons

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*Lee Jenkins:*  
Kobe Bryant knows his time has come

## WELCOME MATT

In games that starter Andrew Luck (right) has missed, the Colts are 4-0 with Matt Hasselbeck.

Photograph by  
Patric Schneider/AP

# Sports Illustrated

# SI NOW

WITH HOST  
**MAGGIE GRAY**



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**MICHAEL B. JORDAN**  
The 28-year-old actor discusses his career; preparations for his role in the latest *Rocky* movie, *Creed*; and growing up with the same name as someone else pretty famous.

**MAGGIE GRAY:** Which of your characters do you identify with most?  
**MICHAEL B. JORDAN:** That's a hard question because they're all from different stages of life. My character Jamal [from *Hard Ball*] was pretty young, from when I was in middle school. Vince Howard [from *Friday Night Lights*] was in high school. Adonis Johnson [from *Creed*] is a grown man. I think

I most identify with Adonis right now. When I was younger, Michael Jordan [of basketball fame]—obviously—was another guy I identified with. I always got teased and kind of picked on when I was younger, to the point where I thought about changing my name until I was able to finally embrace it. My dad's name is Michael Jordan too. So it gave me a healthy chip on

*"I thought about changing my name a bunch of times."*  
—Michael B. Jordan

my shoulder to strive to live up to and be great at something. I didn't know I wanted to act at the time. That was something I just fell into. But getting teased about my name gave me the motivation and drive to make my own legacy and make my own name.  
**MG:** What did you do to prepare for your role as Adonis?

**MBJ:** Maybe about a year out, I started to crack down on training. My diet completely changed: grilled chicken, brown rice, broccoli. Different variations of healthy proteins, carbs, vegetables and a gallon and half of water a day. That's not as easy as it sounds. Then I worked out six days a week, two or three times a day. I consistently did that for about a year. □

For more of Jordan's interview, plus the *SI Now* archive, go to [SI.com/sinow](http://SI.com/sinow)

## TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 24**

Giants DE Damontre Moore says his former Texas A&M teammate **Johnny Manziel** will get it together



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 25**

UFC champ **Holly Holm** says she'd have to train twice as hard for a rematch with Ronda Rousey



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 26**

**Mo'ne Davis** discusses her shoe line, her baseball success and how she deals with fame



▶ **EPISODE: NOV. 27**

Guests discuss the show *Friday Night Tykes* and the intense world of youth football in Texas





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# INBOX

FOR NOV. 23, 2015



Chris Ballard's story about the Caltech basketball program (*Revenge of the Nerds*) was one of the best I have read about the struggles of a school that emphasizes academics over athletics. It was also, by far, the funniest and most entertaining.

Chris Heinrichs, San Antonio



Watching that game between the Bills and the Jets, in their red and green single-color uniforms (SCORECARD), was like watching a moving Christmas tree.

David Pesapane, Westbrook, Conn.



As a high school freshman, I watched the 1964 Chinks (*Pekin Choose*) defeat Cobden High in a basketball game played at the University of Illinois, where the mascot at the time was Chief Illiniwek. Now I look back and wonder, "What were we thinking?" Thanks for making us remember.

Joe Petrilli, Dove Canyon, Calif.

"Threatens to vault rushing records"? "It's not hard to imagine all the records falling to one man"? Todd Gurley is a solid running back for the Rams (*Gurley, Man*). But before you anoint him the greatest of all time, let's see him complete a full NFL season first.

Keith Brennan  
Arlington Heights, Ill.



COVER

A racing fan for many years, I have followed Jeff Gordon most ardently, and I'll surely miss number 24 next season. After a magnificent career, he deserved a better photograph for SI's cover.

Sharyn Budnetz  
Forest Hills, N.Y.

PAGE 26

## SCORECARD

Instead of Serena Williams, my pick for Sportsman of the Year would be Novak Djokovic. Not only did he have a better record in majors (27-1) than Serena (26-1), but he also won 11 titles to her five.

Philip Rehwinkel  
Scotch Plains, N.J.



PAGE 78

## POINT AFTER

Reading Steve Rushin's column on adults behaving like children, I was reminded of Notre Dame hockey games. When a puck goes into the stands, students chant, "Give it to a kid! Give it to a kid!" until the "adult" responds appropriately.

Larry Stewart  
Notre Dame, Ind.

CONTACT  
SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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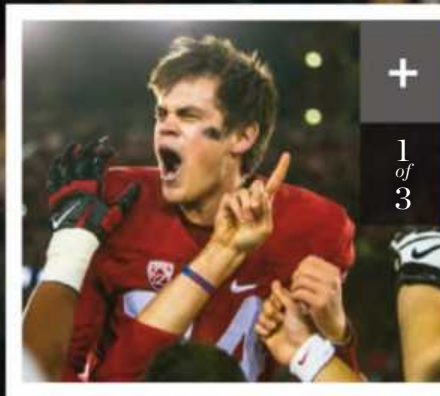
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**Leading  
Off**

## Stanford Three

■ It's the kicker's equivalent of the two-out bottom-of-the-ninth grand slam: last home game as a senior, fourth quarter, team down by one, six seconds on the clock—just enough for a make-or-break 45-yard field goal try. Stanford's Conrad Ukropina must have played out the scenario a million times in his imagination, because last Saturday it sure looked as if he had done it before. Ukropina split the uprights to give the No. 9 Cardinal a 38-36 win over No. 6 Notre Dame, knocking the Irish out of the college football playoff picture. As for the eerie calm that Ukropina displayed during the kick? It was long gone during the wild celebration in Palo Alto (inset).

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
**BRAD MANGIN**  
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED





**Leading  
Off**

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3

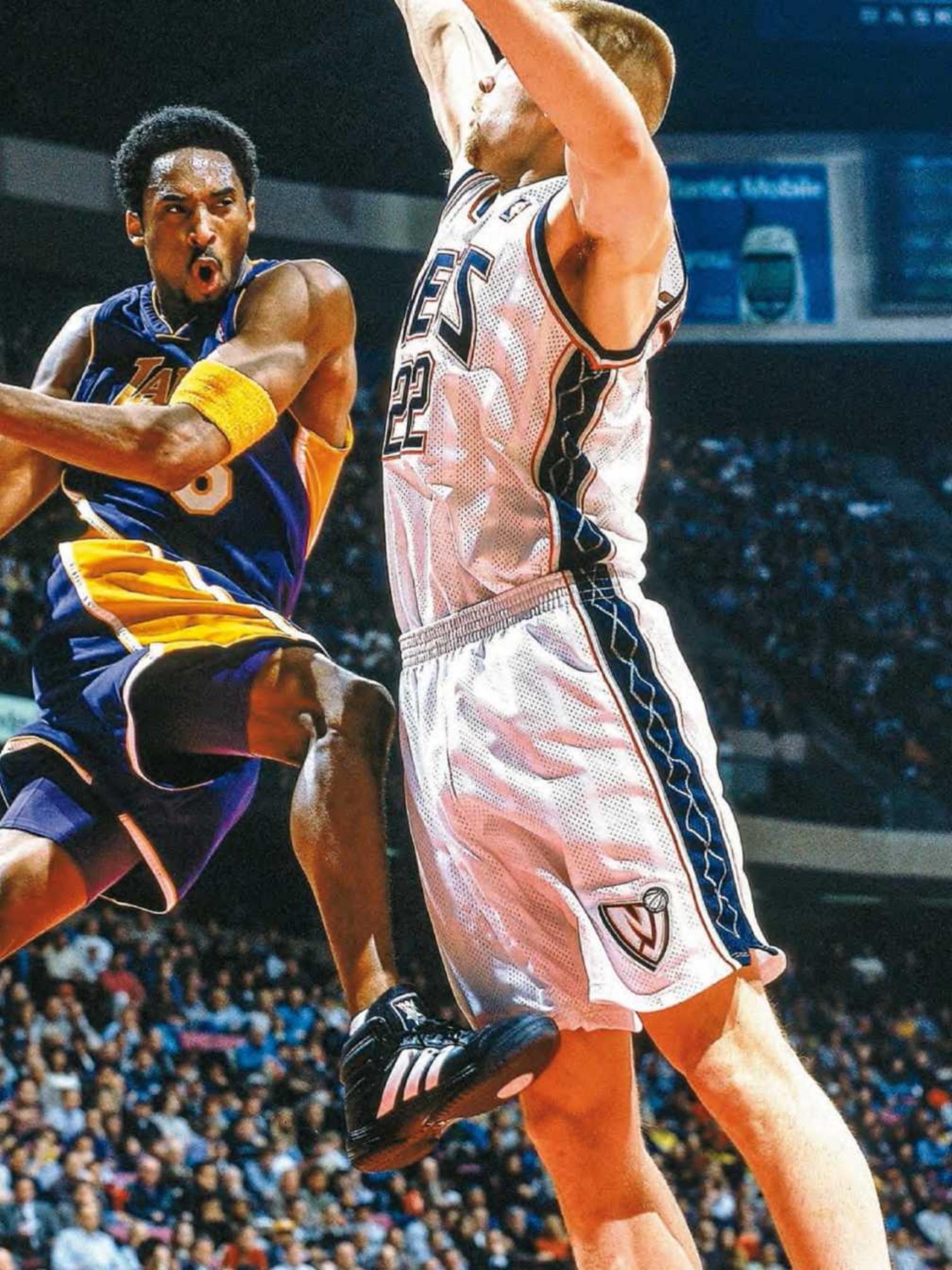
## Purple Reign

■ It has been 20 seasons since Kobe Bryant joined the Lakers as an 18-year-old from Lower Merion High in Ardmore, Pa. In that span—which included five NBA titles, two Finals MVPs, 17 All-Star selections, 12 All-Defensive teams, two scoring titles and the 2008 MVP award—Bryant developed into one of the league's signature stars and an inspiration for a generation of players. On Sunday, with injuries rendering him a shadow of his more formidable self (right, in February 2000), Bryant announced he will retire at the end of this season (POINT AFTER).

PHOTOGRAPH BY  
**MANNY MILLAN**  
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED















+

3 2 3

**Leading  
Off**

## Fresh Takes

■ Over 30 years as a photographer, Bob Martin has seen it all—yet each of his pictures feels like a moment never witnessed before. Martin, an SI staffer from 1998 to 2009, is the rare sports shooter whose eye for emotion and drama (for example, Florence Griffith-Joyner at the 1988 Olympics, far left bottom) is matched by a knack for camera positioning (as at the European Land Yachting Championships, far left middle, and the Cheltenham UK horse race, far left top) and lighting wizardry (as with this synchronized swimmer in 2013, left). These images are among the dozens presented in *1/1000th: The Sports Photography of Bob Martin*, available now.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
**BOB MARTIN**





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Edited by JIM GORANT + TED KEITH

**One and One?**

Simmons is expected to leave Baton Rouge at season's end, and he could be the top NBA pick next June.

**REPORT FILED TO** the SPORTS ILLUSTRATED Scouting Department after watching LSU freshman forward Ben Simmons, the potential No. 1 pick in the 2016 NBA draft, over two days in Brooklyn at the Legends Classic:

**GAMES SCOUTED**

The Tigers' losses to Marquette (81-80, Nov. 23) and N.C. State (83-72, Nov. 24)

**WHAT BEN SIMMONS DID**

*VS. MARQUETTE (40 MINUTES):*

21 points, 20 rebounds, 7 assists

*VS. N.C. STATE (40 MINUTES):*

4 points, 14 rebounds, 10 assists, 3 steals, 3 blocks

**WHO IS BEN SIMMONS?**

At this stage of his career, there are at least four definitions for the 19-year-old phenom out of Melbourne, Australia:

**1** To Ben Simmons, Ben Simmons is a pass-first point guard, with incredible court vision, in a 6' 10" body. Rarely does he attack with the intention of scoring or getting fouled. He drives with the goal of collapsing defenses and setting

# Auspicious Aussie

LSU freshman Ben Simmons is already lighting it up,  
but a breakdown of the wonder from  
Down Under shows how he could be even better

**BY LUKE WINN**



up teammates; he loves to get to the free throw line area off the bounce, then throw a diagonal skip pass to a shooter in either corner. He'll go to elaborate lengths to set up passes, including making a LeBron-like display of calling for a high ball screen, waving off the oncoming screener, then calling for it again, drawing wing defenders' eyes and feet toward the developing situation—and then whipping a pass to a momentarily open wing shooter before the ball screen even arrives. (He did this twice in Brooklyn and each time took great pleasure in the outcome: an assisted three-pointer.)

Simmons's offensive checklist is read, react, create—or, if he absolutely has to, score. “Ben is going to play to what the defense dictates,” LSU coach Johnny Jones said. “If that’s making an extra pass, that’s how he’s going to play, because he very seldom is going to force the issue.”

**2** To neutral observers Simmons is as tantalizing as he is talented. On consecutive nights in just the fourth and fifth games of his career, he flirted with triple doubles against high major opponents, and the feeling I was left with was not awe, but rather that those stats seemed like only 75% of his potential output. I wanted him to be surrounded by better finishers and shotmakers, so he wasn’t leaving four or five assists on the table each game. I also wanted him to force the issue at

least that many more times on offense. He passed up two opportunities to drive for game-winning points against Marquette, and he didn’t even attempt his first field goal against N.C. State until the 2:29 mark of the first half. That Simmons is taking only 20.8% of LSU’s shots when he’s on the floor thus far—a lower rate than guards Antonio Blakeney, Josh Gray, Tim Quarterman and Brandon Sampson—seems like a suboptimal distribution.

**3** To LSU Simmons is a multitude of things. In small lineups he has to serve as its primary rebounder and rim-protector, but he’s a work in progress as an interior defender. The Tigers’ best offensive play is a Simmons defensive rebound, after which no outlet pass is needed. He becomes a point forward or a point center and starts a fast break; his teammates, said Gray, know to “just run lanes” once Simmons grabs a board. If he goes coast-to-coast he’ll throw

deft bounce passes near the basket—or, as Golden Eagles center Luke Fischer found out, merely take two long strides after crossing the three-point line, and make a backpedaling defender the victim of a Vine-worthy dunk. Through five games, 31.4% of the possessions Simmons either ended or assisted on were in transition, and LSU was scoring 1.70 ppp—an excellent rate of efficiency—in those situations. In the half-court the Tigers have had more trouble getting him involved. They’re still in the experimentation stage, trying to figure out if it’s best to isolate Simmons, or to involve him in more pick-and-rolls or to have him go to work in the post.

**4** To opponents Simmons is regarded as a sag (rather than stretch) four: When he has the ball on the perimeter in half-court settings, his defender tends to guard him with at least one foot in the paint. Marquette’s game plan, says freshman forward Henry Ellenson, was to

“play off him and pack the paint.” N.C. State’s game plan, says coach Mark Gottfried, was to “flood the lane, put everybody to sink and clog it up, and not let [Simmons] get going with his penetration.” The reason defenses do this is because Simmons has everything in his arsenal *except* a jump shot.

#### ABOUT THAT JUMPER

To call it nonexistent is no exaggeration. Simmons has yet to even try a three-pointer this season. He has attempted seven two-point jumpers and missed all of them. The one he tried against N.C. State was an uncontested, baseline fadeaway off an out-of-bounds play—and it resulted in an air ball. Simmons’s lack of a jumper has led to supersagged defenses and less-than-ideal pick-and-roll coverages. When he set screens and popped against Marquette, defenders pretty much ignored him and focused on swarming the ballhandler. When LSU ran pick-and-rolls with Simmons as the ballhandler and a nonshooting big man as the screener, both defenders just stepped back and walled off penetration.

I was curious—as were a few of the NBA scouts who showed up early each day to watch LSU’s warmups—if Simmons was merely keeping his long-range shot under wraps. Then I charted his unguarded three-point attempts before the start of the N.C. State game, and the results were not promising. He was

## 16.2 / 14.4

Simmons’s scoring and rebounding averages through LSU’s first five games

## 20.8

Percentage of LSU’s shots Simmons has taken while he’s on the floor, fifth on the team

## 3-2

LSU’s record







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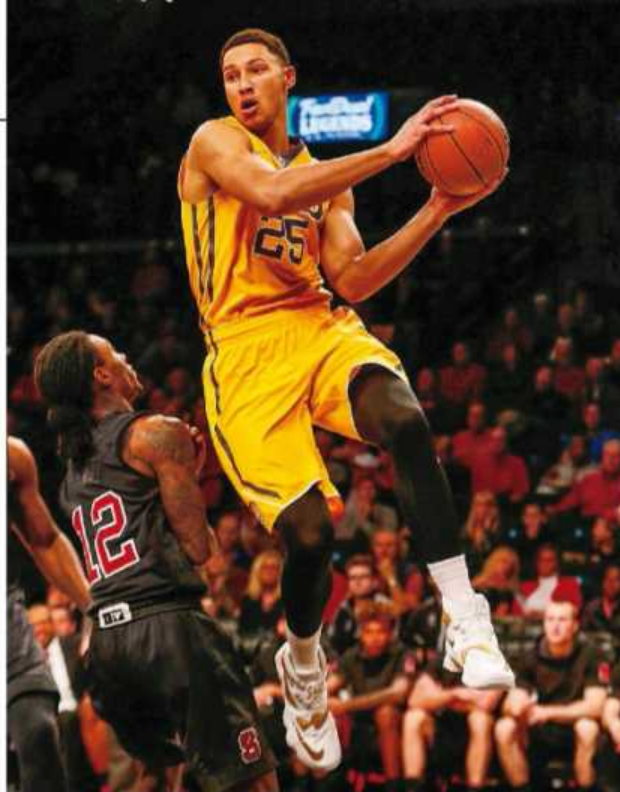
5 of 27 from deep, and two of those makes were of the casual, non-game-form variety—a one-footer and a flat-footer.

#### ABOUT SIMMONS'S HANDEDNESS

I've seen Simmons called ambidextrous, but a more accurate way to put it is that there's a division of responsibilities between each hand. He shoots long- and midrange jumpers and free throws lefthanded. He prefers to dribble lefthanded in transition, and he likes to drive left in isolation. But he reflexively finishes with his right hand on layups or dunks, and even shot one lean-back floater righty against the Wolfpack. Simmons feels that when he does attack, he draws more fouls (including 11 free throw attempts, of which he made nine, against Marquette) by going left and then twisting back to finish right. "It's easier for [defenders] to hit you in the hand if you take it like that," he said.

#### WHAT A FAN WEARING A THROWBACK LSU PETE MARAVICH JERSEY ON NOV. 24 THOUGHT OF SIMMONS

Said Scott Pollack, an LSU fan from Hoboken, N.J., during the second half against N.C. State: "I think [Simmons's] upside is there, but he's being a little too unselfish at this point. . . . I just think he's looking to make the players around him better before he makes himself better." (Regarding a hypothetical Simmons vs.



Maravich duel, Pollack said, "Maravich would take him all day.")

#### TWO MEASURES OF SIMMONS'S POTENTIAL STAR POWER

**1** There were 51 NBA scouts or executives on the list to attend Simmons's appearances at the Barclays Center. (Not surprising: 76ers general manager/tank-architect Sam Hinkie was one of them.)

**2** Chris Meyer and John Aiello, both 15, were sitting in the first row behind N.C. State's bench, wearing shirts that said Montverde Academy—the prep school in Florida where Simmons played for 2½ seasons before heading to LSU. I asked them if they by any chance went to school with Simmons.

They said no. They're students at Manhasset High School on Long Island. "We ordered these online a month ago," Meyer said of the shirts,

*Simmons has everything in his arsenal except a jump shot.*

"and had them customized." On the backs, they each had Simmons's name and high school number, 20. I have not seen fans wearing high school gear of a big-time prospect since Kevin Durant's Montrose Christian throwback and LeBron James's St. Vincent-St. Mary jersey.

#### WHAT COMES NEXT

David Patrick, LSU's Australian-raised assistant coach, who's also Simmons's godfather, said we're witnessing an early-season progression. The first thing Simmons did was establish his brilliant passing ability. And although he grabbed 13, nine and 16 rebounds, respectively, in the Tigers' first three games of the

#### Shoot, man

Simmons is skilled as a passer and rebounder, but his coaches would like to see him score more.

season, LSU's coaches were disappointed in his effort on the glass, so they had him study film of it—and Simmons responded by grabbing 20 boards against Marquette and 14 against N.C. State. What coaches asked him to do after the Marquette loss was think more about rim protection; he responded with three blocks against the Wolfpack.

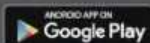
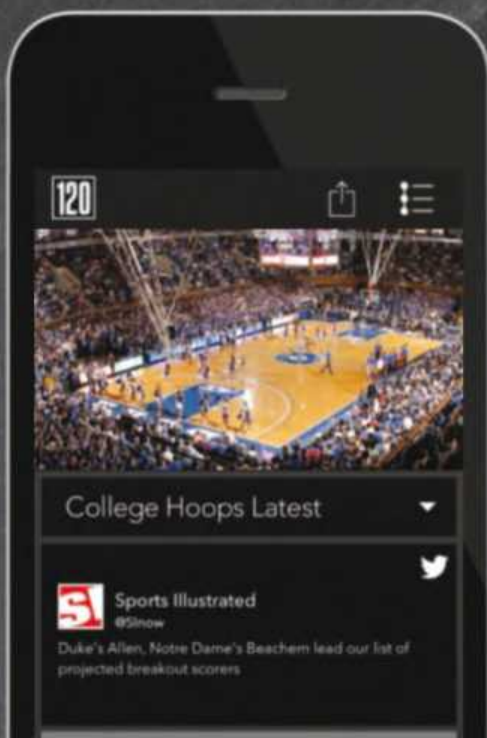
"The next thing," Patrick said, "is maybe scoring and taking over some when we need him to. We'll show him film; he needs to see how guys are playing him, and I think he's smart enough and adaptable enough to make adjustments and score."

I'll make my own adjustments to appreciate Simmons properly—as a playmaker and only occasional scorer—while still yearning for a few 30-point, 20-rebound, 12-assist triple doubles before what is likely to be his one college season comes to an end. It would be a travesty if that happens in the NIT, which is a real possibility for LSU. The Tigers are 3–2, have a weak schedule and have only one more opportunity (vs. Oklahoma on Jan. 30) to pick up a quality nonconference win. I'm willing to cover an NCAA tournament that lacks Ben Simmons, but I won't be happy about it. □



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## GO FIGURE

37

Consecutive losses in October and November over the past three seasons for the 76ers, who have not won a game in those two months since beating Milwaukee in overtime on Nov. 22, 2013. Philadelphia is 0-18, tying the NBA record for worst record to start a season.



19

Straight games with either a goal or an assist by Blackhawks forward Patrick Kane, a record for U.S.-born players. Kane, a native of Buffalo, has a point in all but two games this season.

91-1

Score by which Siena Heights beat Great Lakes Christian in an

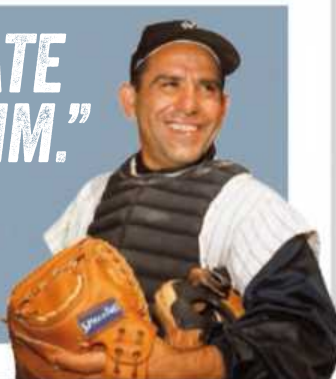
NAIA women's basketball game last Saturday. Great Lakes, which fell to 0-7 on the season, shot 0 for 29 from the field, including 0 for 13 from three-point range, and went scoreless over the final three quarters of the game.

THEY SAID IT

**"IF YOU CAN'T IMITATE HIM, DON'T COPY HIM."**

**President Barack Obama**

Using a Yogi-ism while presenting a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom to Yogi Berra on Nov. 24.



## SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE

Before the OSU-Michigan game Ohio governor John Kasich put forth a resolution banning pleated khakis, calling them an "earthly garment that may be workplace appropriate for Jake from State Farm."

## Les Miles

Despite reports that the school had opted to move on, LSU decided it wanted more of Les.

HOT ▲  
NOT ▼

## Cowboys Fans

They lost QB Tony Romo on Turkey Day—thankful they don't have to wonder how they'll miss the playoffs this year.



FOR SPORTS VIDEOS

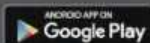
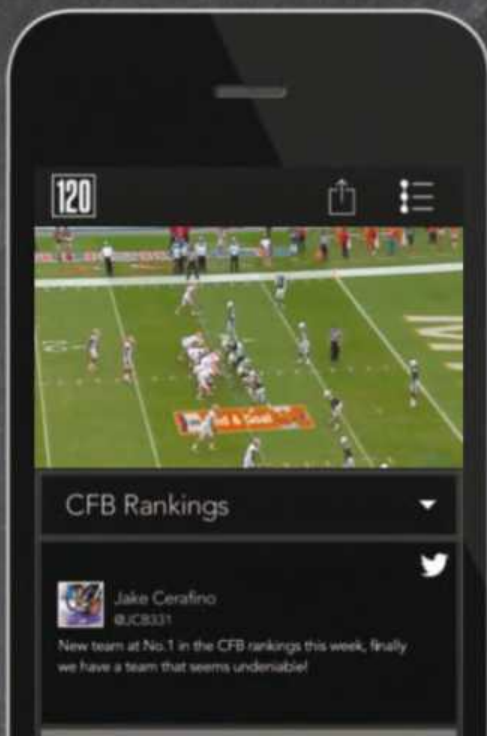
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## BOXING

## Klitsch-KO'd?

■ **After years** of overwhelming opponents with his size, it was fitting that Wladimir Klitschko's nine-year reign atop the heavyweight division was ended by somebody bigger. Last Saturday, in Dusseldorf, Germany, Tyson Fury, the 6' 9", 247-pound Brit, snapped Klitschko's 22-fight winning streak, outboxing the 6' 7" Ukrainian, who weighed in at 246 pounds, en route to a dull decision. Showing off superior speed and motivated by a hunger that Klitschko hasn't shown in years, Fury controlled the fight throughout. A rematch is likely in early 2016, but Fury's win demystified Klitschko and, perhaps, signaled the beginning of a new era in the heavyweight division.

—Chris Mannix



**Maryjeanne Gilbert** | *Peoria, Ill.* | *Cross-country*

Maryjeanne, a senior at Notre Dame High, ran a 16:24.00 on the three-mile state meet course to defend her 2A title. She has the second-best time in Illinois at that distance this season (16:14.70), and she finished third at the 5K Midwest Regionals (17:23.80) to qualify for Foot Locker Nationals. Maryjeanne will run at Notre Dame.



**Logan Cho** | *Lewisburg, Pa.* | *Soccer*

Logan, a senior goalkeeper at Lewisburg Area High, tied the state record with his 59th shutout by blanking Northwestern Lehigh High 3-0 in the PIAA Class AA semifinals. He set the mark with a 4-0 win over South Park High for the championship. A four-year starter, Logan went 84-6-1 and is ninth on the nation's career shutout list.



**Ally Tambornini** | *Sacramento* | *Water Polo*

Ally, a senior at St. Francis Catholic High, scored twice and had six steals in a 6-5 win over Davis Senior High for the Sac-Joaquin Section Division I title. It was the Troubadours' 91st section crown in girls' sports, the most of any school in the section. A USA Water Polo Academic All-American, Ally had 32 goals, 21 assists and a team-high 71 steals this season.

## FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK



**Justin Robinson** | *Lake Katrine, N.Y.* | *Basketball*

Robinson, a 5' 8" junior guard at Monmouth, poured in 22 points, including a pair of free throws with 3.6 seconds remaining, to spark a 70-68 upset of No. 17 Notre Dame, the Hawks' first victory over a Top 25 team in their 32 years in Division I. Last month he had 16 points, three assists and six steals to help beat UCLA 84-81 in overtime.



**Brandi Valley** | *Oley Valley, Pa.* | *Basketball*

Valley, a 5' 7" sophomore guard at Muhlenberg, became the first Division III woman to have three triple doubles in a season since the NCAA began tracking the stat in 2010-11. She had 13 points, 10 rebounds and 15 assists in a 77-74 win over Moravian; 14, 11 and 12 in a 82-50 win over Hood; and 16, 11 and 10 in a 78-50 win over Franklin & Marshall.



**DeShawn Smith** | *Brooksville, Fla.* | *Football*

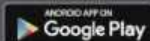
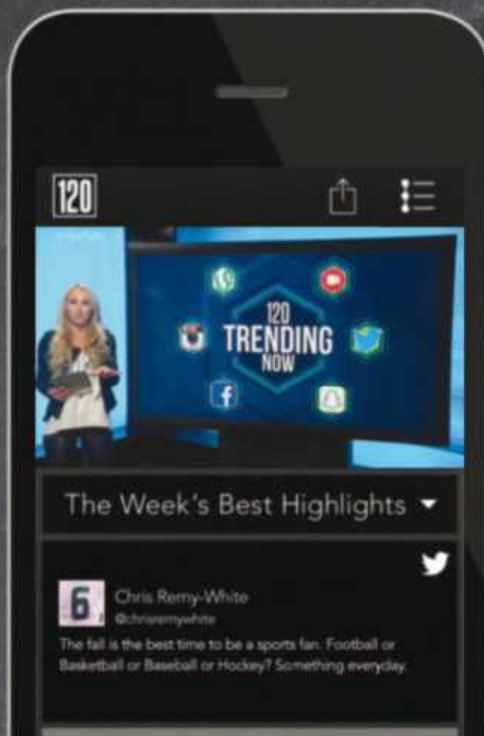
DeShawn, a 5' 8", 185-pound senior running back at Nature Coast Tech High, scored four touchdowns—two rushing, two receiving—in a 40-28 loss to Green Cove Springs Clay High in the 5A quarterfinals to finish the season with 67, tied for third best all time in the nation. He also rushed for 120 yards to lift his total to 3,676, the most in the country this year.

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# JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by **DAN PATRICK**

**DAN PATRICK:** What's your title at HBO?

**BILL SIMMONS:** I don't know. I'm just HBO's Bill Simmons. That sound good?

**DP:** You seem to dress your titles up.

**BS:** I didn't name [my podcast] BSPN. We called it the Bill Simmons Podcast Network. What else am I going to call it? The initials just happen to be BSPN.

**DP:** What are you doing at HBO?

**BS:** I'm launching a TV show, probably by the tail end of next spring. I'm going to get heavily involved in HBO Now. I'm already involved in the HBO documentary side—all stuff I like to do.

**DP:** Who has a brighter future, Bill Simmons or [LSU freshman forward] Ben Simmons?

**BS:** Ben Simmons, in every conceivable way. Financially. Sexually. Professionally.

**DP:** What about journalistically?

**BS:** He's probably a better writer than me. I can't think of a single thing he does that's not better than me.

**DP:** So you're a fan?

**BS:** My whole life I've wanted the Celtics to have a guy named Simmons on their team. I started hearing about Ben Simmons last year. I've been following him on YouTube, getting more and more excited because he



BILL SIMMONS

## REPORT ON B.S.

After ESPN decided not to renew his contract last May, the 46-year-old Sports Guy took his brash persona and media portfolio to HBO, where he's happy to be just your average fan.

has the Magic-Bird passing gene. He's on another level.

**DP:** Ben Simmons seems to have a feel for the game that you can't teach.

**BS:** The passing is what's going to separate him. I grew up during the Magic-Bird era watching guys see the floor like them. It went away during the Jordan era. The thing about Bird: He was such a great passer, it affected the other guys on the team.

**DP:** Are there Bird-like qualities in Steph Curry?

**BS:** You can compare Steph Curry to anyone. Maybe Pete Maravich. You're slightly older than me, so you remember Maravich. I don't. He seems like he's a magician. It's kind of "me first" in a good way.

**DP:** But Maravich got bored with the game and became a gunner, not a winner.

**BS:** Maravich was like a child actor who burned out on the game. One of the things that makes Curry special is that he's an awesome teammate. I think Magic was the greatest teammate of all time. All he wanted to do was make everyone else better. Curry is a lot like that.

**DP:** How do you look back on your departure from ESPN?

**BS:** I said it a million times: I had a great run. It was a great place to work. I have no ill feelings. Now I'm just a sports fan. I can complain about the same things everyone else complains about, and I can praise the same things everyone else praises. □

## GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



New Sprint Cup Series champ

**Kyle Busch**

told me he needed to distract himself toward the finish of the season-ending race at Homestead. "I started singing a song from one of my kid's favorite TV shows," Busch said. "It's from a skit called 'Vo-cab-u-lary.' I probably said that word five times a lap for 60 laps." ... Alabama

junior running back

**Derrick Henry** said that coach Nick Saban will actually let loose at



his lake house in the summer. "He loves [driving his boat] and throwing us off the tube [behind it]," Henry said. "It's a lot of fun." ... Former NBA center and current TNT analyst

**Shaquille O'Neal**

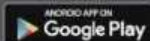


admitted football was once his primary focus, until he hurt his knee. "I was bummed, sitting on the couch, and heard that [Hawks center] Jon Koncak signed for \$13 million and thought, If I can make \$5 million doing the basketball thing, I think I'm going to switch up."



IT'S LIKE A  
**SPORTS BAR**  
IN YOUR POCKET.

YOUR SPORTS ALWAYS ON TAP.



SPORTSMAN  
OF THE YEAR*The Case for . . .***Simone Biles**

BY PHIL TAYLOR

**AT THE WORLD**

Championships in Nanning, China, last year, a bee did what the world's top women gymnasts have been unable to do for two years—force Simone Biles from the top of the medal stand. After she won the all-around competition, Biles was given a bouquet, along with her gold at the medal ceremony, and she was so frightened when the insect came buzzing out of the flowers that she jumped off the podium and did an impromptu floor exercise as she tried to avoid it. “I don’t do bugs,” she said later.

Biles, 18, also doesn’t do second place. She hasn’t lost the all-around competition at a meet since March 2013, and she continued an unprecedented three-year run of dominance in 2015, becoming the first woman to win three straight world championships in the all-around. She also won gold medals in the balance beam and floor exercise at the world championships last month, giving her 10 career golds at the worlds, the most ever among women. Biles is one of the most decorated female gymnasts in history, and she hasn’t even been to an Olympics yet.

The expected success in Rio makes Biles a likely candidate for Sportswoman of Next Year,



but she deserves her place on this year’s short list as well. Though she’s only 4’ 9”, Biles is the biggest thing in her sport. She won her third straight U.S. championship in August—joining Kim Zmeskal as the only three-time national champs—and she has been so far ahead of her competition that the comparisons in the press have not been solely with legends of her sport, such as Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton, but also with other transcendent athletes, such as Serena Williams, Michael Jordan and Lionel Messi.

Even her competitors acknowledge the futility of trying to beat Biles. “All the girls are like, ‘Simone’s just in her own league. Whoever gets second place, that’s the winner. Simone gets her own super first place,’” Aly Raisman, a two-time Olympic

gold medalist from Needham, Mass., told *USA Today*.

Biles doesn’t just win, she laps the field. In a rare miscue she fell during a tumbling pass at the U.S. championships in Indianapolis, but the rest of her performance was so nearly flawless that she won by the second-largest margin of victory ever. After the competition analyst Tim Daggett, a former Olympian, said her all-around score of 63 would “send shock waves and shivers to the rest of the world.”

Biles executes more moves with the highest degrees of difficulty than anyone, and she couples that with jaw-dropping lift on her tumbling passes and vaults. At the U.S. Championships, she separated herself from the field when she received a 9.9 on an Amanar, one of the most difficult vaults. “I don’t really think about the degree of difficulty or the possibility of making a mistake,” Biles says. “I just try to relax and let my preparation and training take over.”

Her talent might never have been discovered if Biles hadn’t visited a gym, Bannon’s Gymnastix in Spring, Texas, on a day-care field trip when she was six. One of the coaches there noticed her copying the moves of some of the gymnasts and doing it remarkably well. The staff sent a letter home to her family, and Biles began taking recreational classes at Gymnastix under Aimee Boorman, who remains her coach today.

Biles has won a truckload of medals since then, but she doesn’t revel in them. Her mother puts them in a safe, and Biles doesn’t know the combination. Maybe it should be 2-0-1-5, the year she was as close to perfect as any athlete in any sport. □

⌵  
Biles is  
one of  
the most  
decorated  
female  
gymnasts  
in history,  
and she  
hasn’t  
even  
been  
to an  
Olympics  
yet.





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Sports  
Illustrated

# LEBRON'S

The shorthanded Cavaliers have the best record in  
won't be satisfied until he's won what the Warriors

**BY LEE JENKINS**

# TIME

Photographs by  
Chris Keane  
For Sports Illustrated



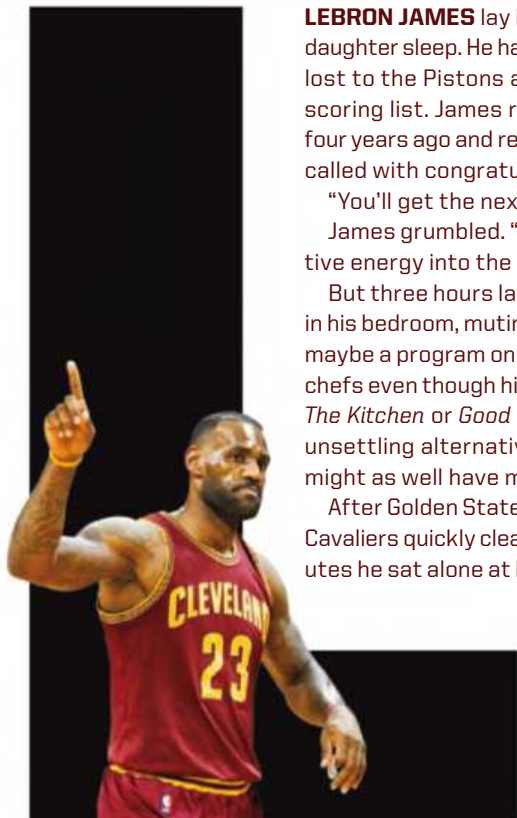




### HIS OLD SELF

His 31st birthday looms, but James has been more aggressive than he was last year, guiding Cleveland to a 13-4 start.

the East, but that hasn't impressed their best player. No, King James took from him in June. The clock is ticking, and the kid gloves are off



**LEBRON JAMES** lay in bed at 2 a.m., listening to his wife and one-year-old daughter sleep. He had just returned home from Detroit, where the Cavaliers lost to the Pistons and he surpassed Jerry West for 19th on the all-time scoring list. James reveres West—he devoured the Logo’s autobiography four years ago and related to his Finals torment—so James’s wife, Savannah, called with congratulations after the game. “We lost,” he said.

“You’ll get the next one,” she replied.

James grumbled. “I’ll be better when I get back. I won’t bring this negative energy into the house.”

But three hours later he remained restless and turned on the television in his bedroom, muting the sound. He needed a show to help him wind down, maybe a program on his beloved Food Network, where he knows all the top chefs even though his lone specialty is a grilled cheese sandwich. *Chopped*, *The Kitchen* or *Good Eats* would have done the trick, but he queued up an unsettling alternative, recorded earlier that night: Warriors-Raptors. He might as well have mainlined Red Bull.

After Golden State clinched the championship in Cleveland last June, the Cavaliers quickly cleared out of their locker room. James stayed. For 45 minutes he sat alone at his corner stall, still in an undershirt and shorts, towel draped over his shoulders. He stared silently into the mouth of the locker, into the teeth of the summer. *The training, the practicing, the lifting, the early mornings, the healthy meals, the work, the treatment*, James thought. *For what?* When he finally left Quicken Loans Arena, he trudged down a hallway polluted by champagne fumes, past a room where the Warriors danced with the trophy.

James has fallen in the Finals four times, but each defeat feels different, and so do the ensuing stages of grief. “It was painful,” he says. “But then some days go by, and you refocus, and you start to think, Maybe I can get there again.” Over the summer he rewatched the series and learned that he was the first player in Finals history to lead both teams in points, rebounds and assists. “Kind of cool,” he told himself, though he took no gratification in the one-man act as it unfolded. He then saw Cavaliers owner Dan Gilbert pony up to retain key free agents and add a couple. He recalled how the team hummed through the second half of the season before power forward Kevin Love was injured early in the playoffs and point guard Kyrie Irving in the Finals. “I don’t think we were outcoached or outplayed,” James concluded. “I think we were outmatched.”

Besides, it was only his first season back in Cleveland, and he was not the best version of himself. He reported to the Cavaliers out of shape, by his Iron-man standards, partly because the fanfare surrounding his return disrupted his routine. Left knee and back trouble sapped his speed and explosiveness. Newfound leadership duties required extra attention. He averaged the most turnovers of his career and the fewest points, 25.3, since he was a rookie. He shot less than 50% for the first time in six years and suffered uncharacteristic defensive lapses. He was spectacular down the stretch and unstoppable in the Finals, but he could have been more efficient, which is why he rented a house in Miami and blocked off September for a punishing pre-training camp.

James worked on ballhandling and post skills every morning from 8:30 to 10 at Key Biscayne Community Center with Cavaliers assistant Phil Handy; built strength from 11 to 1 at DBC Fitness with trainer Mike Mancias; shot from 7 to 9 at Immaculata-La Salle High or the University of Miami with business partner



## LOVE IN

James is again leading the Cavs in scoring, but he has worked hard to join forces with Love [O].

Randy Mims. Anybody who visited James expecting a South Beach bash left disappointed. “I think he went out to dinner four times,” Mims says. “That was it.”

While Mims watched his childhood friend churn through three-a-days, he flashed back to the summer of 2011, after James’s first season with the Heat. He had just lost to the Mavericks in the Finals, prompting a period of introspection and reinvention, which yielded titles in each of the next two years. The changes are not as radical this time around, but James is also reminded of ’11,





## LEBRON JAMES

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JAMES SEES THE URGENCY IN THE WARRIORS. HE YEARNs TO SEE IT IN THE CAVS. HE LIED TO SAVANNAH: HE SEETHES HIMSELF TO SLEEP.

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specifically the disposition that he and his teammates carried into the following season. “We had a rage,” he recalls. “We weren’t always perfect, but we played with rage and we practiced with rage.”

As he spoke, the Cavaliers were 8–3, admirable given that neither member of their starting backcourt had appeared yet. Irving (left knee) and defensive stopper Iman Shumpert (right wrist) are expected to heal by mid-month, but in the meantime James is powerlifting the Cavs. He has already dunked more times in half-court sets than he did all last season, according to in-house stats, and he leads the league in scoring in clutch situations. He has been the best player—and his Cavs the best squad—east of Oakland. “All things considered, our record is pretty good, isn’t it?” James asks. “Well, I don’t like it. I don’t like it at all.”

He barks at center Timofey Mozgov for trying to turn a post feed into an alley-oop instead of bringing the ball down first. He points at his temple when power forward Tristan Thompson commits an offensive foul. He rails against the Cavaliers’ effort after a double-overtime loss on the second night of a back-to-back in Milwaukee. He chides teammates at a players-only meeting after a three-

game winning streak is snapped in Toronto. When third-string point guard Jared Cunningham makes an errant pass against the Hawks, James stalks to the bench, never mind that the Cavs are leading by 26 and the play is ongoing. It is hard to tell which of these outbursts are caused by rage run rampant—“Competitive emotions,” he calls them, “that I’m still working on”—and which are caused by his compulsion to inject that rage into others.

James turns 31 on Dec. 30 and has already logged more minutes in his career than Magic Johnson or Larry Bird, but instead of pacing he is pushing: telling reporters he plans to play all 82 games, skipping regular fourth-quarter respites, taking late-night jaunts to the St. Vincent–St. Mary High gym for free throws. (His alma mater gave him the key.) “The most important thing in his life is winning a championship here, and he feels incredible pressure to deliver,” says general manager David Griffin. “He is consumed by it.” Gregg Popovich and the Spurs, masters of the NBA marathon, might question the sprinter’s rationale. Maybe James is racing because he doesn’t know how many title shots he has left. Maybe it’s because he wants to set an example for young teammates who can someday carry him when he can no longer carry them. Or maybe it’s because of that team on his TV.

The Warriors do not play with rage. They play with unhinged joy, which spills off the screen in the James house past 3 a.m., as they unleash rainbows on the Raptors and improve to 12–0. James sees urgency in the Warriors. He yearns to see it in the Cavs. He lied to Savannah. He seethes himself to sleep.

**L**EBRON JAMES gathered close friends in a suite on the 58th floor of the Wynn hotel in Las Vegas on July 10, 2014. “I want to put on a coat again,” he told them. “I want to grind again.” To James, the Heat was a Fortune 500 company, the Cavaliers a sentimental startup with talent and resources. “Coming back has been everything I thought,” he says, 16 months later, “only a lot harder. I can’t tell you it’s been comfortable. But that’s O.K. I don’t really like to be comfortable.”

Failure is a poison, and when James reentered the Cavs’ headquarters last fall, he found an organization infected. “Great young players but part-time pros,” says swingman James Jones, who followed James from the Heat. “They’d be locked in for an hour before practice, an hour after practice, but the discipline and commitment weren’t there.” Players rolled in late for treatment sessions, bagged extra shooting, left plates of food sitting around the cafeteria. “Leniency,” James says, “which was very different from the structure I’d grown accustomed to.”

There was no individual to blame. The coaching staff was new. The front office was revamped. When James bolted in 2010, the Cavaliers wisely shifted their priority from contention to player development, and the moment he returned they had to reverse course again. James fumed every time he saw a one-on-one dribbling exhibition, a contested jumper, a smile in a losing locker room. “He was kind of sizing everybody up,” Thompson says. “You could tell he was frustrated.”

James, in his first turn as a sole leader, searched for the most effective approach. “First, I tried to be patient and kind of measure them,” he says. “But you experiment with different styles. ‘This doesn’t work. S---. Well, maybe that will work.’ Sometimes you think it does, and then the next day you realize that it doesn’t.”

On Nov. 4 at Portland, James stood in the corner, letting Irving lose a senseless individual duel with the Blazers’ Damian Lillard. The following night, in Utah, Irving scored 34 points without an assist, and James warned him that he could never finish a game without an assist again. He deployed multiple methods to teach the same lesson, hoping one would resonate. On Nov. 17, James missed a shootaround before a game against the Nuggets because he was sick, and the Cavaliers acted as if their teacher ditched school. They tossed dirty gear onto the locker room floor, ignoring the hamper in the middle of the room. Equipment manager Mark Cashman took a picture of the slop and after practice the next day showed it to the group. “I’ve worked here 15 years,” Cashman says, “and that was the maddest I’ve ever been.”

After Cashman tore into the team, James provided a graphic exclamation point. Cashman was transported to 2003, when James was a rookie and Cleveland played the second night of a preseason back-to-back in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The Cavs landed in St. John’s at 5 a.m. and were scheduled to face the Raptors in front of a sellout crowd that night. But shortly before tip-off at an arena that housed a minor league hockey team, officials noticed condensation from the ice on the court. The game was canceled, the Cavs were sent to their bus, and irritated players flung jerseys and shorts in Cashman’s direction. James handed him a neatly folded uniform. “I didn’t have a lot growing up,” he explained to Cashman then. “I have to take care of it.”

Fast-forward to 2014, when James became the custodian of the franchise.



## WARRIOR MENTALITY

James had a historic Finals, but the loss has given rise to an obsession with Curry and Golden State.

He took postpractice ice baths alongside Jones and swingman Mike Miller, another running mate from Miami, and discussed what elements of Heat culture could migrate north. But Jones and Miller were role players. James had to be the conduit. “Leading takes energy, and you can’t get tired of it,” Jones implored. “You can’t do your work at home. You have to do it here. You have to show them what it looks like.” James tried to demonstrate how he trains and recovers, but his knee and back wouldn’t let him. “That was the toughest thing,” he says. “I was teaching and preaching—telling them how hard I’m going to work, how I’m going to bust my ass—but I couldn’t really do it because I was hurting.” He fretted for the team but also for himself. “Why can’t I get to that spot anymore?” he asked Mancias, his longtime trainer. “I used to get to that spot.”

James heard observers talk about him as if he were Tim Duncan, his prime suddenly past. “What is your prime, anyway?” James wonders. “Seriously, when is it? I have no idea. Is it 27 to 30? 27 to 31? Who set the number on that?” Injury, James acknowledges, is a symptom of age. But health did not explain why he ran so much isolation and took so many difficult shots. In Miami, James and Dwyane Wade played a game within the game. If one of them shot over 50%, he was the winner. If one shot under, he was the loser. The Heat could win



by 30 points, but if James went 7 for 15, he berated himself for one ill-advised fadeaway. In Cleveland, nobody played that game.

"For three years my team was on the same page, the same wavelength," James says. "We just had to look at each other. It's hard to trust people when you've never been in the bunker with them. At times you do feel a little alone." He was adjusting to a new roster while the Cavaliers were acclimating to a new world, where every sentence is a sound bite and every sound bite is a story. James is comfortable in that construct. It's all he knows. But in becoming the metaphor for an entire region, he added even more to his load. When James seemed scattered early last season and a former coach was asked why, he did not point to the back or the knee. He pointed to the head.

"I think about a lot of s---," James agrees. "Sometimes too much. But then I try to remember what I learned from the great Pat Riley: *What is the main thing? Because the main thing has to be the main thing.*"

**JAMES RETURNED** to the Cavaliers on Jan. 13 in Phoenix after a two-week mental and physical sabbatical that included recovery from an anti-inflammatory injection in his back. The Cavs lost their sixth straight game that night, but James was rejuvenated, and afterward comedian Frank Caliendo visited the locker room. Caliendo performed an ice-breaking impersonation of actor Morgan Freeman reading James's "I'm Coming Home" essay for SI. Then he mimicked Charles Barkley ripping newly acquired gunner J.R. Smith.

Caliendo took credit for the Cavaliers' turnaround—they went 34–9 for the rest of the season—but the true catalysts arrived a week earlier. James knew the Cavs were trying to pry Mozgov from the Nuggets, but he was skeptical that they could. Likewise, he understood they were attempting to land Shumpert and Smith from the Knicks, but that sounded like another long shot. The twin trades, consummated less than 48 hours apart, did more than fortify the rotation. They validated James's faith. "It reassured me," he says, "that Griff was in it just as well as I was."

There is nuance in the relationship between stars and GMs, stars and coaches, stars and other stars. With James there is even more nuance, because no other franchise is as synonymous with one player. Of course, Griffin queries James about potential moves, and of course James contacts free-agent targets. "[But] people

have this vision of him making all these demands of us and he's never done that once," Griffin says. "It's a narrative everybody wants to believe because he's LeBron and because he can. And sure, if he goes to Dan Gilbert and says, 'F--- Dave Griffin, he's got to go away or I'm not re-signing,' then I'll go away. But that's not what he does. That's not who he is. It's not what he wants to do. He wants to be the best player on the planet and the best leader he can, and that's what he invests all his time in." Thompson's free-agent negotiations this summer could have been awkward, given that he is represented by James's friend and agent, Rich Paul. But they were not, at least as far as James was concerned, because he essentially recused himself from the process.

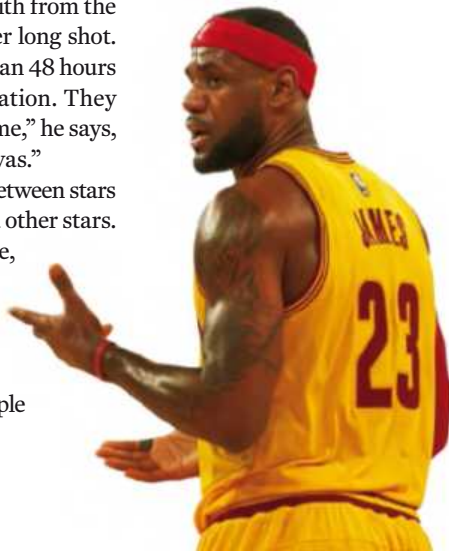
James doesn't like to reference power—"People confuse that word way too often," he says—choosing *opportunity* instead. According to James, coach David Blatt gives him the opportunity to change plays based on what he sees from the defense, and he takes advantage when he thinks an edge can be gained. "Coach is the captain," James says. "I'm one of his generals." Specific military rank notwithstanding, some executives outside the Cavs' walls chuckle at depictions of James calling more audibles than Peyton Manning. "All we want is for our star to take ownership, to be invested in our success," says another GM. "Being too invested, which I understand is the knock on him, seems like an O.K. problem."

## LEBRON JAMES

"WHAT IS YOUR PRIME, ANYWAY?" JAMES ASKS. "SERIOUSLY, WHEN IS IT? I HAVE NO IDEA. IS IT 27 TO 30? 27 TO 31? WHO SET A NUMBER ON THAT?"

In the past two months James has extended public olive branches to Blatt ("As great as any coach" in the league) and Love ("The focal point" of the offense), a reversal from subtle tweaks of last season. "Some guys you have to get on, and some guys you have to put your arm around and slap on the ass," Love says. "You have to understand people and how to deal with them. LeBron is incredibly smart. He knows how to get the best out of us." Marginalized on the perimeter for stretches of his first campaign in Cleveland, Love met with James at an L.A. hotel pool in June. Love had already decided to re-sign with the Cavaliers, but he still wanted to chat. "One of the first things I told him was, 'Over the next five years we are going to get to know each other better, and that's going to make for a better relationship and a better product on the floor,'" Love says. They discussed how to accelerate the process. "Anything you need from me, let me know," James said. "If you need to tell me what to do, tell me."

When James declares he is riding Love's coattails, he may be overstating matters, but the praise is not hollow. Despite spending the summer rehabbing from left shoulder surgery, Love was averaging 19.8 points and 11.8 rebounds at week's end, his performance and his positioning more in line with how he played in Minnesota. "There are still games I find myself shooting 10 threes and thinking, What is that?" Love says. "But I'm in the paint more and rebounding more." Love is a hoops savant and it takes a while to





## LEBRON JAMES

IN TRAINING CAMP JAMES TOLD HIS TEAMMATES THEY HAD EVERYTHING THEY NEED TO WIN. "I'VE CUT THE PATIENCE IN HALF," HE SAYS.

appreciate every element of his expertise: the outlet passes, hockey assists, ability to exploit space. "There were times he got down on himself, and things I wish I understood," James says. "He keeps a little more to himself than some other guys, but now I feel like I can go to him and have a real conversation about what needs to be done, and he can do the same with me. I want him to believe in himself and understand how important he is to this movement."

James craves camaraderie. It is no coincidence, he suggests, that his first season in the NBA, his first season in Miami and his first season back in Cleveland were his most challenging. In Year Two, the Cavaliers say, he is more likely to fling an arm around Blatt at practice and parrot his postgame message to the press. "It's refreshing to come every day and know you're about the same things with your best guy," Blatt says.

Recently, James walked past the Cavs' training room, spotting Irving and Shumpert inside. "We can't be ready until you are!" he shouted. James is an affable teammate, playing cards on the plane, arranging group dinners and ordering everybody's sides. "Guys like him," Griffin says. "He's one of them in almost every way. But when he's in the heat of competition, there's no one like him. He is a very intense human being. He's unrelenting. It's not acceptable to blow an assignment. He'll let you know. And then he'll be playing cards with you again on the plane."

Growing up, James hung a Kobe Bryant poster on his bedroom wall, and this season he is monitoring every Lakers game for fear it will be Bryant's last. James and Bryant are nothing alike. James loves to share, while Bryant prefers to shine. Bryant is a loner, and James needs a group. But their iron fists overlap. "The little guy with the hammer," James calls himself. He has edited his leadership style once again, turning more vocal, which the Cavaliers prefer to last year's occasional silent treatments. "I think he made guys feel like he was doing this *for* them," Griffin says. "Now he's making them feel like he's doing it *with* them. He's empowering them. He's brought a sense of togetherness to it."

In a meeting to start training camp James told the Cavaliers, "The organization gave us everything we need. There are no more excuses." He has since suspended the team's high-fiving pregame introduction routine, as the Heat



once did, so players can't claim they're not ready for the tip. "I've cut the patience in half," James says, a testament to the team's progress.

"What he's done has worked," Jones adds. "The atmosphere here is a little tougher, a little more disciplined, a lot more focused, a lot more committed. These are full-time pros now. They come in for multiple film sessions, multiple treatment sessions, shoot by themselves. They've watched him."

**A**N ERA is ending. Bryant will retire after this season (POINT AFTER), and Kevin Garnett and Dirk Nowitzki will follow soon. Then James, the eternal prodigy, will be the godfather. He wonders if players will stop him for advice. "I don't think my face is very approachable," he says. Actually, as global icons go, he is rather accessible, which the Cavaliers have discovered. Teammates pepper him with starry-eyed questions. *Can you go to the mall? Yes. Do you drive yourself? Sometimes. Do restaurants close when you go there? No.*

James has become a bit of a foodie—sashimi and tuna tartare replacing steaks and burgers—and he marvels at new eateries in the Flats and in the suburbs. He reserves a private room at a spot like Dante, an upscale Mediterranean set in a former bank building in Tremont, and stays for hours with friends and family. He drinks cabernet, usually Mayacamas or Silver Oak, while Mims plays music on a Beats Pill portable speaker. DJ Montage, as James calls Mims, spun for the Cavs in their San Francisco hotel ballroom during the Finals.

James still hits up St. V games and watches his 11-year-old son, LeBron Jr., dissect AAU defenses.





## LOOKING GOOD

With James running the show, Cleveland has the third-most-efficient offense in the league.

he was forever No. 1. He would scan the names below his and imagine those faceless kids, where they were and what they were doing to eclipse him. In the NBA he can more easily track his pursuers. Derrick Rose was on his heels in 2011, Kevin Durant in '12, Paul George in '13. None caught up. Calling James the greatest player in the world was so obvious, it became a cliché.

But here comes Steph Curry, for the second year in a row, putting the NBA in his personal incinerator. "I hear the chatter about who is the best player in the league," James says. "I see the guys who are barreling down. That locks me in even more." So

Junior is already receiving attention from college recruiters and scouting services, a source of pride and dismay for his dad. "He doesn't want people to know who he is," James says. "He hates when they ask him for pictures and autographs. He won't even wear my number." Junior chose 0, same as Love.

James hopes the bubble of Northeast Ohio will insulate his daughter and two sons just as it insulated him. "There is a comfort and a shadow and a protection here," James says. "This city protects me and my family. I can't explain it, but when I was a kid and I'd walk the streets or be out late or play on outdoor courts, I felt like people were watching me and thinking, Let's protect him. I could feel that. I still feel it."

His life is rich but complicated. He is a business owner, an actor and a philanthropist. This summer *The New Yorker* called him "the funniest person" in *Trainwreck*, a movie filled with comic luminaries. The University of Akron partnered with his foundation to fund full scholarships for all the at-risk students he sponsors in the city's public schools who qualify for college, a number that could reach into the thousands. He is the rare American athlete regularly asked about current events.

He treasures his many roles, but they bring him back to Riley's *main thing*. "The homes I live in, the cars I drive, the schools my kids attend, the movies, the shows, the businesses, it's all because of basketball," James says. "That's the main thing. It always has to be the main thing."

When James was in high school and players were ranked by magazines,

he logs 39 minutes against the Knicks and 45 the next night against the Bucks. He plays the whole fourth quarter against the Raptors. He undergoes daily back therapy to make this possible. He talks longingly of 70 wins. "If I'm able to link up with Pop in the afterlife, we can sit down and drink some wine and I can ask him how to pace," he says. "The Spurs know how to pace perfection. I haven't figured that out yet." He ticks off personal shortcomings. "Don't box out sometimes, allow guys to get offensive rebounds, allow guys to backdoor cut on me. . ."

James wants to harness his "competitive emotions"—the fits of anger that often produce those errors—but the truth is he'd rather keep them than lose them altogether. "Once I stop having those moments," James says, "I will be like, Oh, man, I might need to figure out if this is it for me." He is a long way from that conversation. Fourteen hours earlier he poured in 27 points with nine rebounds and six assists against Milwaukee. The Cavaliers won, and James shot 69.2%, so Wade would say he won twice. Afterward James dressed at his corner locker, the stall adorned by a blue paper crown with glitter given to him by a terminally ill girl he met in Indiana. "That will stay up there forever," James said.

His eyes wandered to a TV in the corner, showing the Warriors-Clippers game. Golden State would rally from 23 down to reach 13–0, raising the bar, rousing the King. A week later the reigning champs would break the record for the best start in league history, 16–0. (Through Sunday the Warriors were 18–0, the Cavs 13–4.) Much can happen between December and June, but Golden State and Cleveland appear to be on a six-month collision course, with Curry and James behind their respective wheels.

For the first time in nearly a decade, James's transcendence is being matched by another's. "I'm great," he says, a crack that recalls his press conference after Game 5 of the Finals. "I'm the best player in the world," he said then.

He is asked if he ever needs to remind himself. "No," he replies. "I don't need to be reminded." He flashes a broad smile, eyebrows incredulously raised.

Do you? □





# WHAT WOULD CLIPBOARD

*\*OR OSWEILER, OR HASSELBECK, OR FITZPATRICK . . .*



IT'S SOMETHING EVERY COACH IN THE LEAGUE HAS WONDERED. IT'S AN INEVITABLE DAY WHEN THE STARTER GOES DOWN. HERE'S

BY AUSTIN MURPHY

**THE KID** weathered the storm, by which we do not mean the snow showers cloaking Mile High Stadium on Sunday. Before outplaying Tom Brady in the fourth quarter, before leading an 83-yard drive for the go-ahead TD in the final minutes against the Patriots, Brock Osweiler *looked* like a guy muddling through his second NFL start. He threw a slapstick interception,

took a few bad sacks and missed his share of throws. His first five possessions ended *punt, punt, punt, pick, punt*. “Hey, bad s--- happens,” concluded guard Evan Mathis. “But Brock never wavered. He was cool all night.”

One measure of that cool: After scanning New England’s defensive front moments before his third snap in overtime, tied at 24, Osweiler flipped the play call, audibling to a toss-sweep in the other direction. C.J. Anderson’s subsequent 48-yard TD run up the left sideline gave Denver a 30–24 victory over the previously undefeated Pats.

It was more than New England’s 10-game victory streak that expired. By winning his second consecutive start in place of Peyton Manning (sidelined with plantar fasciitis in particular and advancing years in general), the 25-year-old Osweiler made a loud, clear statement: This is my team now. Even when Manning’s left foot is healed and the walking boot comes off, Osweiler should, and likely will, be the starter.

He is a 6’ 8”, 240-pound former high school hoops standout from Kalispell, Mont. After starring at QB for Arizona State, Osweiler entered a 3½-year gestation period with the Broncos, learning from the gimpy, creaking future first-ballot Hall of Famer whom he is now nudging into Life After Football. And while Denver’s was, as Osweiler put it, “truly a special team win,” it was also a victory for one of the NFL’s least appreciated tribes.

**JAMES BOND** has a license to kill. Meet the men who carry a license to loiter. Behold the backup quarterback as he follows the action on the field, shifting his weight from one leg to the other, debating, perhaps, whether or not to shower after the game, not because his personal hygiene is in question, but because he’s barely broken a sweat.

Nor will he in the next game. Or the next. Or—in some cases—in *any* regular-season game for one, two, three seasons. Or longer. “You do



## ALT KEYS

Backup QBs this year have ranged from suboptimal (Cassel, top left) to surprising (McCown, bottom right). Where your team’s fallback falls just may determine its fate.

RONALD MARTINEZ/GETTY IMAGES (CASSEL); DAVID BERGMAN FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (FITZPATRICK); RICH SCHULTZ/GETTY IMAGES (SANCHEZ, MANZIEL); WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES (METTENBERGER); ROB CARR/GETTY IMAGES (KEENUM); LARRY W. SMITH/EPA (YATES); DONALD MIRALLES/GETTY IMAGES (VICK); MATT KARTOZIAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (DANIEL); DAVID E. KLUTHO FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (OSWEILER, JONES); BEN MARGOT/AP (GABBERT); HANNAH FOSLIEN/GETTY IMAGES (HILL); JASON GETZ/USA TODAY SPORTS (HASSELBECK WITH WHITEHURST); CARY EDMONDSON/USA TODAY SPORTS (MCGLOIN); CHARLES LECLAIRE/USA TODAY SPORTS (MCCARRON); PAUL SANCYA/AP (ORLOVSKY); JOE NICHOLSON/USA TODAY SPORTS (CLAUSEN); MARK J. REBELAS/USA TODAY SPORTS (STANTON); TIM SHARP/AP (WEEDEN); BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES (MANUEL); JOE CAMPOREALE/USA TODAY SPORTS (CLEMENS); MARK ZERO/USA TODAY SPORTS (MANNION); ANDREW INNERARITY/USA TODAY SPORTS (MOORE); CHUCK COOK/USA TODAY SPORTS (MCCOWN)





# D JESUS\* DO?

ERED ABOUT HIS BACKUP QB, EYEING THE  
TO THE HARDEST-WATCHING MEN IN FOOTBALL





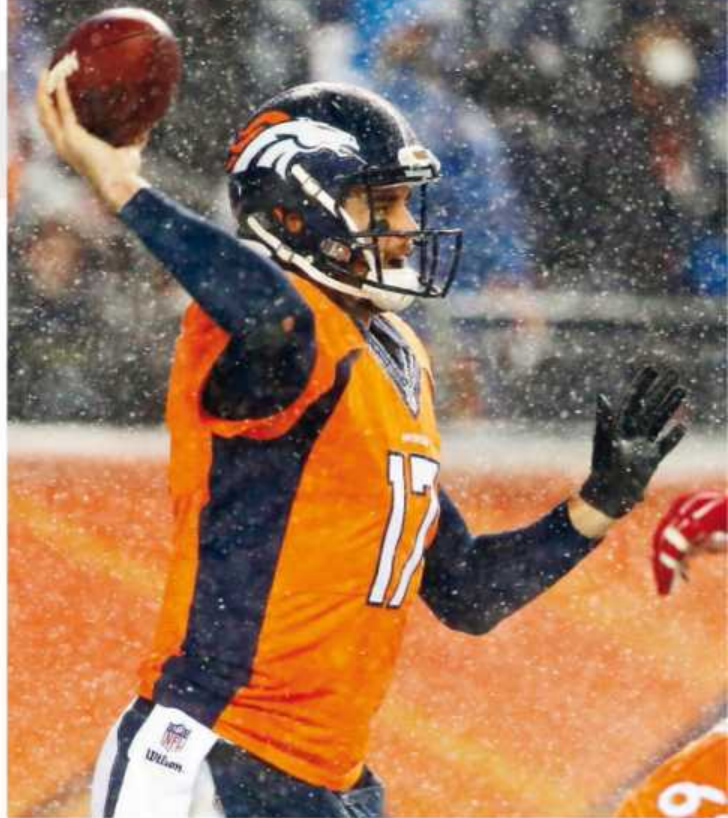
## BACKUP QBs

everything you possibly can to prepare,” says Drew Stanton, who is Carson Palmer’s understudy with the Cardinals. “And usually it goes for naught. You’re studying for a test that never comes.”

This is not what they signed up for. During speed-date interviews at the scouting combine, hotshot QB prospects do not tell coaches and personnel people, “I hope to go months, sometimes years, between meaningful snaps.” They do not daydream, coming out of college, of leading the scout team to moral victories in the middle of the week. They do not say, “I want to be the next Clipboard Jesus.” Even Clipboard Jesus didn’t want to be Clipboard Jesus.

“Growing up playing quarterback, you want to be Aaron Rodgers or Peyton [Manning] or Tom Brady,” says Charlie Whitehurst, whose Fabio-like mane and perennial backup status over a decade in the NFL have earned him that sublime—and now, sadly, obsolete—cognomen. (Backup QBs long ago traded in clipboards for tablet computers.)

“Did I think my career would turn out differently?” asks the considerate, obliging and self-interviewing Tablet Jesus. “Absolutely. I thought I’d be a starter for six, seven, eight



## RANKING THE 25 BACKUPS WHO’VE THROWN PASSES IN 2015

BY BEN BASKIN

(Sorry, Ryan Mallett: If you miss the plane, you’re off the list)

1

### MATT HASSELBECK

COLTS

Salvaged a seemingly lost season. His 4-0 record and 64.7 completion percentage have Indy atop AFC South.

2

### BROCK OSWEILER

BRONCOS

Two starts, two wins, including OT thriller over Pats. But 11 sacks in nine quarters show a lack of pocket presence.

3

### RYAN FITZPATRICK

JETS

Jumped to QB1 because of a sucker punch. By no means a Pro Bowler, he still has 20 TDs and has N.Y. in playoff hunt.

4

### JOHNNY MANZIEL

BROWNS

He’s been electrifying at times but lacks support of his coaches. Needs to be consistent, keep out of trouble.

years. I’m at the point where I know that’s not gonna happen for me. But I’m still around.”

And then, suddenly, he wasn’t. Two weeks after that jaunty declaration, Whitehurst was waived by the Titans.

**D**ESPITE THE NFL’S desire to swathe them in bubble wrap, QBs keep going down. The same day that Peyton Manning limped off the field in Week 10, brittle Sam Bradford suffered a concussion and a separated shoulder in the Eagles’ game against the Dolphins. After tantalizing with some promising relief throws, backup Mark Sanchez reverted to form, committing a ghastly turnover—in this case, an interception on second-and-goal with 4:32 to play, when all Philly needed was a field goal to take the lead. They lost 20–19 and haven’t won since.

Through Sunday, 58 different signal-callers have stepped onto the field and fired passes. (That’s a lot, but nowhere near the El Niño of injuries and ineptitude that soaked the 2010 season, when 79 QBs logged attempts.) So far this season, such marquee gunslingers as Manning, Ben Roethlisberger, Andrew Luck and Jay Cutler have missed multiple games; Tony Romo and Joe Flacco are out until ’16. Their replacements have ranged from Even-Worse-

Than-We-Expected (the Bears’ 10 Jimmy Clausen–led possessions in their 26–0 loss to the Seahawks resulted in . . . 10 punts!) to Much-Better-Than-We-Expected. When Big Ben’s backup, Mike Vick, tore his right hamstring against the Cardinals on Oct. 18, his place was taken by Landry Jones, a fourth-round pick out of Oklahoma in ’13 who’d never suited up before this season. Taking the field against Arizona, his team trailing 10–6, the heretofore third-in-command hooked up with Martavis Bryant for an eight-yard TD on his second NFL pass. Previously written off by many of the Steelers’ faithful as a wasted draft pick, the ex-Sooner engineered four straight scoring drives, capped by another TD to Bryant—this one went 88 yards—that put the game out of reach.

It’s understandable if backups feel a trifle ghoulish: Their big break often depends on someone getting hurt. Not all those injuries happen on the field. On Aug. 7, Jets starter Geno Smith was sucker-punched by teammate IK Enemkpali, who broke Smith’s jaw. Into the breach stepped journeyman Ryan Fitzpatrick, nicknamed the Amish Rifle for his voluminous beard. To reverse New York’s grim mojo following a recent 1–4 spell, Fitzpatrick trimmed back his topiary. The result: He threw four TDs on Sunday in a rout of the Dolphins, keeping the Jets afloat in the AFC wild-card race.

CHRIS HUMPHREY/USA TODAY SPORTS



**61.3% COMPLETIONS 63.3% / 81.9 PASSER RATING 90.7**

**R**ECALL PRINCE HUMPERDINCK beseeching Butterscup in *The Princess Bride*. Should her beloved Westley fail to return for her, the prince implores, “please consider me as an alternative to suicide.” The caliber of backup QBs in the NFL today spans the gamut from a handful of Hump-erdincks on one end of the spectrum—Clausen, Kellen Clemens, Zach Mettenberger—to Matt Hasselbeck on the other. At the age of 40, he is 4–0 in relief of Andrew Luck, whose injuries this season include a sore throwing shoulder and a lacerated kidney. During one especially heroic span in October, Hasselbeck won two games in five days. In so doing, he kept the Colts’ playoff hopes alive and gave new meaning to the expression “intestinal fortitude.”

After a decade as The Man in Seattle, during which time he made three Pro Bowls and led the Seahawks to six playoff appearances, including the first Super Bowl in franchise history, Hasselbeck spent two seasons with the Titans as a part-time starter and full-time mentor—Crash Davis to Jake Locker’s Nuke LaLoosh. Hasselbeck’s move to Indianapolis two years ago from Nashville made sense: He was leaving a dysfunctional franchise

The Titans cut him. He’s our third-team tight end [in Indy], but he’s *ballin’* for us. When Jack Doyle scores a touchdown, I’m cheering louder than everyone except maybe his mom.”

Hasselbeck cheerleads. He coaches. He works on his Luck impersonation. Seriously. “For the longest time [in Seattle], it was my backup’s job to imitate me and my cadence,” he says. “Now it’s *my* job to mimic Andrew. He says it, *Hustle-HUS-tle . . . set GO!* And I’ve gotta say it exactly the same way.”

Did it really matter? It wasn’t as if Hasselbeck was likely to be taking many snaps. Entering this season, Luck hadn’t missed a single start in his four-year career—until Oct. 4, when he was sidelined by that bum right shoulder. Hasselbeck was better than workmanlike in his first start in 35 months: 30 of 47 for 282 yards, one touchdown and zero picks in a 16–13 overtime victory, at home, over the Jaguars. His passer rating of 87.4 would’ve been higher were it not for at least four drops by his receivers—and for the fact that he spent the intermission puking his guts up.

His condition worsened from “vomiting” during the game to “crazy vomiting, with massive headache” after it. So compromised



5

**LUKE MCCOWN**

**SAINTS**

Completed 81.6% of passes in only start, a close loss to now 11–0 Panthers. Jumps several spots for his Verizon ad.

6

**T.J. YATES**

**TEXANS**

Try to ignore the 46.7 completion percentage. Played in two games this season, and Houston won both.

7

**KELLEN CLEMENS**

**RAMS**

Six attempts, five completions, including 19-yard TD to Keenan Allen—highest TD percentage in NFL.

8

**MATT MOORE**

**DOLPHINS**

Tied for NFL’s highest completion percentage—meaning, he hit on his only throw, for 14 yards. Can’t knock it.

9

**CHASE DANIEL**

**CHIEFS**

Perfect (2 for 2), like Moore, but for only four total yards. Alex Smith has quieted any calls for Daniel’s promotion.

for one that was expected to contend for Super Bowls. But it was also a steep come-down, a concession to his advancing years. No one in Indy (where Luck was firmly entrenched as the starter) even bothered to pretend that Hasselbeck would be competing for the starting job. He’d enjoyed a long, highly productive career, but if he wanted to stay in the league, it was time for him to enter the figurative compartment where so many of his fellow backups already resided: the box bearing the legend, IN CASE OF EMERGENCY BREAK GLASS.

“A lot of the satisfaction I’ve gotten has come from working with other guys,” says Hasselbeck—and that extends beyond Luck, whom he says doesn’t really *need* his help. “Take Khaled Holmes,” who is seated, facing his own stall, 10 feet away, and who looks over sheepishly at the mention of his name. “The guy didn’t dress for [most of] two years. Now he’s our starting center. Then you’ve got Jack Doyle—he was my scout-team tight end in Tennessee.



was Hasselbeck that he couldn’t drive all the way home, stopping instead at Luck’s house, where he was ministered to by Andrew’s saintly mother, Kathy.

While the Colts faced a short week heading into their next game, a Thursday-night tilt in Houston, it felt like a very *long* week for Hasselbeck, whose frequent evacuations were by this time taking place via—his words—“the basement and the attic.” While that quip drew guffaws, his situation was dire: Badly dehydrated, he required daily IVs. Two nights before the game, he was at the hospital until 2 a.m. as

doctors tried to figure out what was ailing him. He looked terrible at Wednesday’s walk-through, after which quarterbacks coach Clyde Christensen gave him an out: “You don’t have to do this. If you feel that you can’t, we’ll find a way.”

Even as Christensen gave him the option to sit this one out, it was not a choice Hasselbeck gave himself. The QB says, “Trent

# 6.3 YARDS PER ATTEMPT 7.4 / 1.4:1 TDS-TO-INTS 2.0:1

Dilfer always used to tell me, 'You always play your best when you're sick or you're hurt. It forces you to focus, to stick to your reads, to not try to do anything extra.'

Those two QBs overlapped in Seattle from 2001 through '04. Hasselbeck remembers one day badly bruising his right knee. On the bench he told Dilfer, "I don't think I can finish this game." As it happened, the two passers had been bingeing on episodes of the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* at the time. And whereas most backups might have commenced warming up, Dilfer evoked the heroes of Easy Company: "What would Major Winters do right now? Let's go, man! *You got this!*"

Hasselbeck finished that game. But he dug far deeper to take the start against the Texans in Week 5 this year. Audibling deftly, playing with savvy and patience, he completed 18 of 29 passes for 213 yards and two TDs. He led the Colts to scores on five of their first seven possessions. His best throw was his last: a 43-yard rainbow dropped into the hands of T.Y. Hilton to ice the game.

Hasselbeck's voice cracked slightly as he tried to explain for a sideline reporter how he'd been able to go: "For some unknown

for Matthew Stafford in Detroit. "If you don't, you're not gonna be prepared, and it's gonna show. Then you're not going to be around."

"If you love [football] and you love your teammates, you get yourself prepared," says Chargers offensive coordinator Frank Reich. "You know there are a lot people, in and out of that locker room, depending on you."

Reich *thought* he was prepared for the Bills' wild-card playoff against the Houston Oilers on Jan. 3, 1993. Jim Kelly, Buffalo's starter, had suffered strained ligaments in his right knee in Week 17, giving Reich, his backup, all week to get ready.

But the game was a disaster for the Bills. Warren Moon threw four touchdown passes *in the first half*, after which the Oilers led 28-3. Reich promptly uncorked a pick-six to open the third quarter. And that, he has since concluded, was "the key" to what was about to transpire. "At halftime," he surmises, "they were probably telling each other, 'O.K., we gotta come out in the second half like it's 0-0!' Once they were up 32 points, they lost a little bit of their edge."

A little bit? In a span of six minutes and 52 seconds the Bills

10

## AJ MCCARRON

BENGALS

Last member of the perfect completion percentage club. First (and only) NFL pass: three-yard completion Sunday.



11

## SEAN MANNION

RAMS

Third-round pick went 6 of 7 for 31 yards in mop-up debut Sunday. Could get more looks soon as Rams' season dies.

12

## BLAINE GABBERT

49ERS

QB rating of 91.0 in best three-game stretch of career. Alas, 49ers are 1-2 since he took over for Colin Kaepernick.

13

## MIKE VICK

STEELERS

This isn't the Michael Vick Experience of old, but his two wins in three relief starts kept the Steelers in the playoff hunt.

14

## LANDRY JONES

STEELERS

Led upset win over Cardinals—then, Sunday, became first QB since '03 to throw multiple INTs in four or fewer attempts.

reason, I was able to finish. I can't explain it. It was amazing."

Where did the tears come from?

It had been an emotional day, he explained. "I've got nothing left."

He does, it turns out. Which is a good thing. Luck isn't expected back in the lineup until mid-December.

**H**OW DOES the Maytag Repairman of professional athletes stay sharp and engaged? How does he resist the temptation to coast through a week, to let his mind wander rather than performing yet another of those "mental reps" on which these walking insurance policies are forced to subsist? As thespians are wont to ask: What is his motivation?

"Sooner or later, you know that test is coming," says Stanton, whose three-year drought ended last season when he started eight games in relief of Palmer (ACL). "And when it does, the difference between winning and losing can come down to one read."

But what if it's not coming this week? Or this year? Or the year after?

"You almost have to lie to yourself, brainwash yourself into believing you're *going* to play," says Dan Orlovsky, who mops up

cut that deficit to four points. With three minutes to play, Reich threw his fourth TD pass of the second half, a 17-yarder to Andre Reed, giving Buffalo its first lead. Al Del Greco's chip shot field goal sent the game into overtime. Houston won the toss but lost the game 41-38.

The man who engineered the greatest comeback in NFL history started just 20 games in his 13 seasons. For eight of those campaigns, he backed up Kelly, an eventual Hall of Famer. Surely he could've started, and starred, on numerous other teams. *Right?* Asked if he had any regrets, Reich replies, "No," and does not elaborate. Considering the mark he left on NFL history, we should take him at his word.

Stanton could be The Guy in quite a few NFL cities. He is, arguably, the Frank Reich of his day. He won five of his eight starts in '14 and was in the top 32 of almost every statistical





category. That said, he notices a difference in the way he is regarded by teammates, depending on whether he is officially No. 1 or No. 2. “When you’re the starter, all of a sudden you have this confidence about yourself—you can demand more out of people,” he notes. And should he raise his voice to a fellow player after reverting to the No. 2 guy? “They’re gonna be like, Dude, you don’t even play on Sundays.”

It is a feast-or-famine existence: long intervals of boredom followed by moments of excruciating pressure. Welcome to the paradoxical existence of the backup QB, by definition a selfless team player who would confess, under the influence of a powerful truth serum, that it would not break his heart to see the starter indisposed for a series—or a game, or a month—or two. The man who might be the most invisible player on the roster is also, arguably, its second most important.

By the time you realize you need an upgrade at QB2, it’s too late. Four years ago, with Peyton Manning’s recovery from multiple neck surgeries taking longer than expected, the Colts trotted out 38-year-old Kerry Collins, who lost three games and was replaced



15

**EJ MANUEL**

**BILLS**

So-so in two starts (vs. Bengals, Jags): three TDs, three INTs. But those losses dinged the Bills’ playoff hopes.



16

**CASE KEENUM**

**RAMS**

Played through a Week 11 concussion, then lost a costly fumble. Little value in playing through pain these days.

17

**DAN ORLOVSKY**

**LIONS**

Absolutely *meh* in two relief outings. But, really, we still remember when he ran out of the back of the end zone in ‘08.

18

**MATT MCGLOIN**

**RAIDERS**

Only PT came against the Bengals’ No. 1 defense: 74.2% completions, but only 142 yards in a blowout loss.

19

**SHAUN HILL**

**VIKINGS**

If not for Adrian Peterson, he’d have squandered a lead after being handed the reins late against the Rams.

by Curtis Painter, a scatter-armed Kurt Cobain look-alike who dropped eight more. Indy lost 14 games that season (Orlovsky, the fourth-stringer, swooped in to win two of five down the stretch), and vice chairman Bill Polian lost his job, but not before learning the lesson articulated by the incoming general manager, Ryan Grigson: “If you don’t have a backup quarterback that can do it, you basically just gave up your season.”

The Cowboys did not “give up” their season as a result of failing to have an adequate replacement for Romo (who twice this season broke his collarbone). Just three quarters of it—the dozen games he will miss in 2015. Taking unsteady hold of the tiller following Romo’s first exit, in Week 2, was Brandon Weeden, who entered the next game carrying a 56.0 completion percentage from the previous three seasons. Three losses later—in his defense, Weeden didn’t have All-Pro Dez Bryant to target—he was benched in favor of Matt Cassel, who lost all four of his starts. Paging Babe Laufenberg.

Before fracturing his collarbone again last Thursday, against the Panthers, Romo appeared dazed and confused while throwing three interceptions. Covering for him was CBS analyst Phil Simms, who explained that it would take several weeks for Romo

to regain his “rhythm” and timing. Backups, meanwhile, are mothballed for entire seasons at a stretch and get no meaningful practice reps during the week. “If we said we need a few games to get into a rhythm,” says Reich, “we’d get annihilated.”

**T**EDDY BRIDGEWATER was facedown on the turf on Nov. 3, still woozy from a forearm to the head by Rams cornerback Lamarcus Joyner. Vikings coach Mike Zimmer was launching f-bombs toward the Rams’ sideline. Shaun Hill, for his part, was already taking warmup throws, preparing to replace Bridgewater, who was concussed and done for the day.

Hill is 35 and holding up well—as would most pro athletes who’ve started just eight games in the last five years. Humble, easygoing and chipmunk-cheeked, he bears more than a passing resemblance to Will Ferrell, which is fitting. Just as Chazz, Ferrell’s satin-robed, meatloaf-craving satyr in *Wedding Crashers*, stands at the pinnacle of that vocation, so is Hill the apotheosis of his. Bow down to the King of the Mental Rep.

This is Hill’s second tour of duty in Minnesota. The club first signed him as an undrafted free agent in 2002. Then-coach Mike Tice liked the former Maryland Terrapin—just not enough to put

## BACKUP QBs

him on the field during Hill's three years as a Viking. (Correction: Hill *did* take two snaps—back-to-back kneel-downs during a win over the Bears in '06.) Over the following 13 years, before circling back to Minneapolis, Hill made stops in San Francisco, Detroit and St. Louis, starting 34 of a possible 208 games, burnishing his reputation for no-frills dependability, in the process earning guru stature in the backup-QB world.

"Shaun could teach a college course on the subject," says Stanton, who in 2010 was Detroit's No. 3 behind, in order, Stafford and Hill. "I wouldn't be in the league if it wasn't for everything he did for me, showing me how to prepare, how to be professional and how to have fun with it."

One of Hill's lessons to his apprentices: Wear your helmet during the game, even on the sideline. Most backups know the cautionary example of Orlovsky, who as a Houston backup in 2010 was unable to find his headgear when Texans starter Matt Schaub was forced to leave a game. Finally, Orlovsky borrowed the helmet of tight end Garrett Graham. Alas, it was comically oversized, making Orlovsky look macrocephalic, like

feel the speed of the game," he says. "I want my eyes to have to sort through moving bodies, to see holes and throwing lanes."

Chronically insecure, the members of this backup tribe are constantly seeking ways to add value. They can do this by . . . well, by not oversleeping in training camp, by not being tardy for meetings and by not missing the team flight to an away game, as Ryan Mallett did on Oct. 24. Three days later the Texans whacked him.

These men often serve as emissaries for their teams' starters. McCown says he spends time drawing Brees out on "what he's looking for on certain plays." Armed with that info, he will sidle over to a receiver and make a clarification or a correction about that player's angle coming out of a break, or the size of his split in a formation. Panthers backup



20

### MARK SANCHEZ

#### EAGLES

Same old problem: 4.4% INT rate is highest for any QB not named Peyton or Romo (minimum 56 attempts).

21

### ZACH METTENBERGER

#### TITANS

Two starts, zero wins, 14.8 rating, nine sacks. No quarterback has this many passes (74) without a single 25-yard completion.

22

### DREW STANTON

#### CARDINALS

Mopped up in a blowout win over the Lions and went 1 of 4—worst completion percentage in the league.

23

### MATT CASSEL

#### COWBOYS

For the cost of a fifth-round pick (Bills), Dallas bought itself a guy who can't, for the life of him, find All-Pro WR Dez Bryant.

24

### JIMMY CLAUSEN

#### BEARS, RAVENS

With just six first downs on 184 passing yards in seven quarters of relief, he had Bears crying for Cutler's return.

25

### BRANDON WEEDEN

#### COWBOYS, TEXANS

More telling than the fact he couldn't win in three starts with loaded offense: He was benched for Matt Cassel.

the Jack in the Box mascot, and resulting in additional ridicule.

During Vikings practices these days, while Bridgewater calls plays in the huddle, Hill stands at a close remove, calling the same plays to a pretend assemblage of imaginary teammates. Like a good understudy, he doesn't want to be tongue-tied when it's finally his turn to take the stage. "Some of these calls can get lengthy," he points out, "and if you don't practice them, it's going to be tough to get them out in a game."

Equally meticulous in his prep is the Saints' Luke McCown, who single-handedly drove up the coolness factor of second-stringers by appearing this fall in a Verizon commercial extolling the company's backup generators. Where Hill repeats a play call aloud, McCown merely mouths the words that starter Drew Brees is verbalizing, giving him the appearance of a bad ventriloquist. Check that—a bad *stalker* ventriloquist. When Brees breaks huddle, McCown approaches the line of scrimmage 10 or so yards behind him. "I'll walk up, identify the front and the coverage, all that," he says. But McCown's mental rep has just begun. "On the practice film it looks kind of funny—you can see me dropping back right behind Drew, going through the same motions of the play."

This is above and beyond what many reserves do. "I want to

Derek Anderson, who won consecutive games for Carolina (three TDs, zero INTs) when Cam Newton went down last season, turns up the volume on telecasts of upcoming opponents: He wants to *hear* how the other team's quarterback—the guy he'll be impersonating all week on the scout team—calls plays. After studying that opposing offense, he'll kibitz with the Panthers' defensive coaches, sharing observations. "If they make a big play on something I pointed out because of the tape I watched," he says, "that's a good feeling for me."

As McCown delivers his last line in that Verizon ad—"I bet if they had the chance, some of those backups would really shine"—his expression seems forlorn, sad. But he debates that characterization: "I would say it's more ambiguous, more open-ended." It allows for the possibility of a heroic outcome, is his point.

Because backups have a secret. They live with the conviction that their close-up, their Frank Reich Moment, awaits. Until then, barring emergencies, they're not on the field much, it's true. But they're in the room, on the sideline, on the plane.

Like Clipboard Jesus, who was unemployed for all of one day in November before the Colts signed him off waivers, they're still around. □





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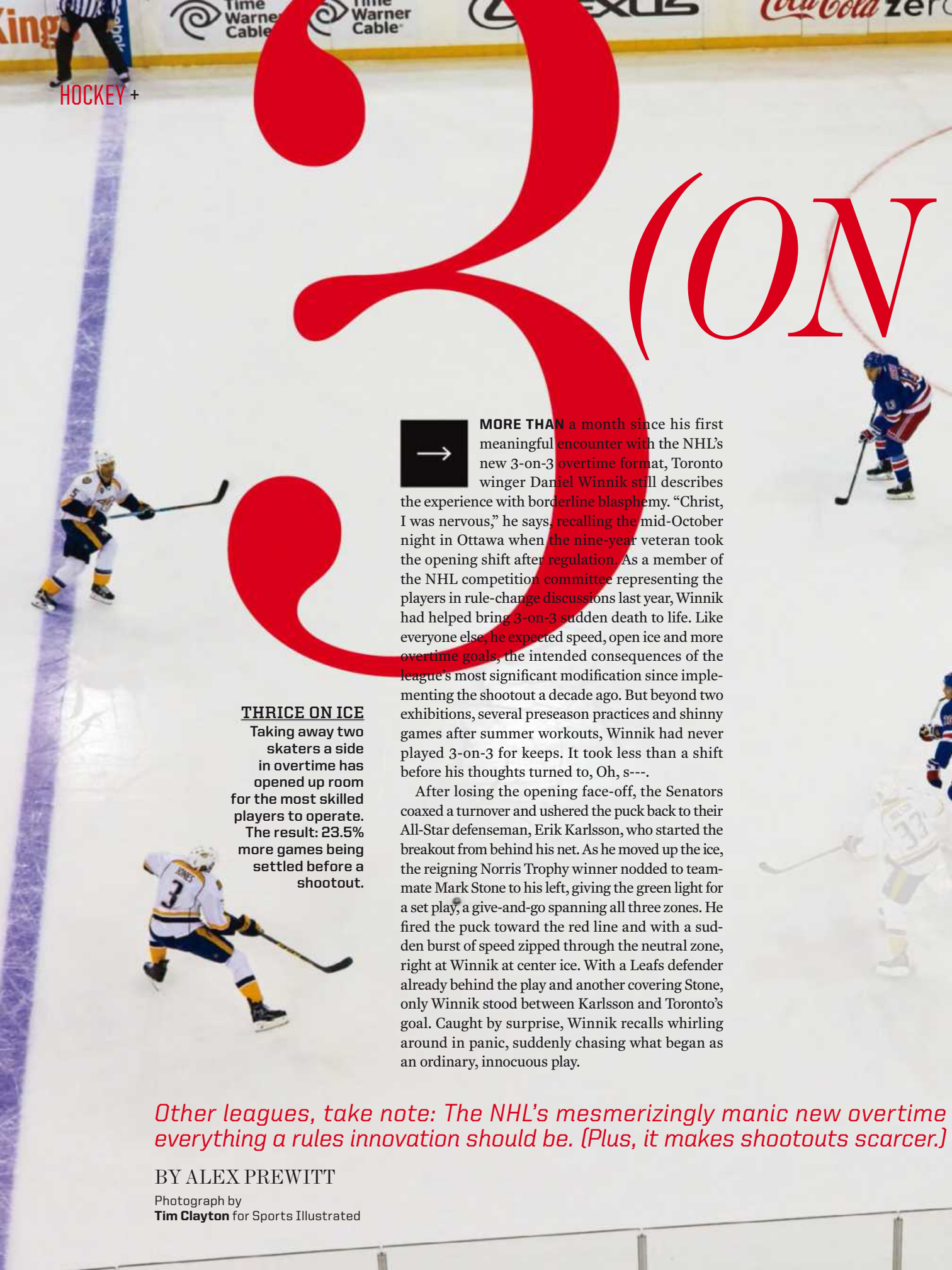
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HOCKEY+

(ON



**MORE THAN** a month since his first meaningful encounter with the NHL's new 3-on-3 overtime format, Toronto winger Daniel Winnik still describes the experience with borderline blasphemy. "Christ, I was nervous," he says, recalling the mid-October night in Ottawa when the nine-year veteran took the opening shift after regulation. As a member of the NHL competition committee representing the players in rule-change discussions last year, Winnik had helped bring 3-on-3 sudden death to life. Like everyone else, he expected speed, open ice and more overtime goals, the intended consequences of the league's most significant modification since implementing the shootout a decade ago. But beyond two exhibitions, several preseason practices and shinny games after summer workouts, Winnik had never played 3-on-3 for keeps. It took less than a shift before his thoughts turned to, Oh, s---.

### **THRICE ON ICE**

Taking away two skaters a side in overtime has opened up room for the most skilled players to operate. The result: 23.5% more games being settled before a shootout.

After losing the opening face-off, the Senators coaxed a turnover and ushered the puck back to their All-Star defenseman, Erik Karlsson, who started the breakout from behind his net. As he moved up the ice, the reigning Norris Trophy winner nodded to teammate Mark Stone to his left, giving the green light for a set play, a give-and-go spanning all three zones. He fired the puck toward the red line and with a sudden burst of speed zipped through the neutral zone, right at Winnik at center ice. With a Leafs defender already behind the play and another covering Stone, only Winnik stood between Karlsson and Toronto's goal. Caught by surprise, Winnik recalls whirling around in panic, suddenly chasing what began as an ordinary, innocuous play.

*Other leagues, take note: The NHL's mesmerizingly manic new overtime everything a rules innovation should be. (Plus, it makes shootouts scarcer.)*

BY ALEX PREWITT

Photograph by  
**Tim Clayton** for Sports Illustrated





# 3) *IS THE MAGIC NUMBER*

*format—three skaters a side, miles of open ice, scoring chances galore—is  
What's not to love about anarchy on ice? Pipe down, goalies. . . .*

## NFL / *Modest Proposal*

# PASSES ON KICKOFF RETURNS

BY MARK MRAVIC

**CAL FAMOUSLY DID IT**, succeeding in a five-lateral kickoff return to win a game as time expired in 1982 (*below*). And while teams across all levels have attempted to duplicate The Play, the fact is, the rugby-style last-second kickoff return is a comical embarrassment, especially in the NFL, where it amounts to 22 millionaires playing hot potato. Coverage teams are too athletic and the field too narrow for a series of laterals and reverses to fool anyone.

But there is a way to make a kickoff return more exciting, more dignified—and even give it a chance to succeed: Allow the receiving team to advance the ball through the air. Yes, permit the forward pass on kickoff returns.

The NFL altered kickoff rules in 2011 to reduce the risk of injury, and this might actually make those plays even less dangerous. Assuming the kick coverage team would have to incorporate aspects of pass defense, players would be less likely to sprint headlong into full-speed collisions. If it's too extreme to incorporate on every kickoff, then limit the forward-pass allowance to inside the two-minute warning.

Adding another layer of X's and O's to the game, it would also preserve safety and, most important, make the kickoff fun again.



Such is the hazard of dining at the NHL's breakaway buffet, where 3-on-2s become 2-on-1s, and 2-on-1s open into 1-on-nones. Had Karlsson's pass been returned instead of skittering harmlessly away, the Maple Leafs might have lost in less than 30 seconds. (As it was, they ended the five-minute overtime still tied and lost in a shootout.) Even so, that wouldn't have beaten Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews's winner against Tampa Bay on Oct. 24, when he danced between two backcheckers, fended off their sticks and punched through his rebound 17 seconds in, the fastest 3-on-3 goal to date. That loss capped off three straight overtime games for the Lightning, who had beaten Winnipeg on a 3-on-1 with just 36 seconds off the clock the night before. In Nashville on Oct. 20, before eventually going to a shootout, Lightning captain Steven Stamkos was caught out for a grueling two minutes, the longest 3-on-3 shift on record. "It's a free-for-all," Minnesota forward Jason Zucker says. "It's wide-open hockey."

But with the open ice that 3-on-3 creates, something as small as a bad bounce or a slow change can lead to chaos. "It could be a track meet," says Washington defenseman Matt Niskanen, "or it could be a chess match." As such, there are strategies.

The first commandment of 3-on-3 overtime: Possess the puck at all costs, even if the methods run counter to intuition. "Everything's completely contradictory," Calgary GM Brad Treliving says. Instead of dumping the puck for a line change, thereby creating a 50-50 battle in the offensive zone, players in 3-on-3 hold on to it, even if it means giving up favorable zone position. "There are things players do instinctually that you don't necessarily want them doing in 3-on-3," Treliving says.

Goalies too. Scoring chances cascade from end to end with so much unoccupied ice—but keeping the puck out of the net is only the beginning. "In regulation," Wild netminder Devan Dubnyk says, "you're worrying about stopping a shot and only stopping a shot, not what you're going to do with it after

you catch it." A quick toss from the glove can spark a breakout in the opposite direction; taking a timely feed back from a defenseman can ensure a line change. Freezing the puck and setting up a dangerous defensive-zone draw isn't always the most prudent play. "We have guys passing to our goaltender from the red line, for God's sake," New Jersey GM Ray Shero says. "The goalie better be awake."

On the same night Toews beat Tampa Bay, Red Wings netminder Petr Mrazek abandoned his crease to play a loose puck inside the left face-off circle in Vancouver. As the Canucks changed, Mrazek whipped a 94-foot pass off the boards to teammate Gustav Nyquist at the far blue line. Nyquist scored, giving Mrazek







NBA / *Modest Proposal*

## SAY GOODBYE, CYLINDER

BY BEN GOLLIVER

**ACCORDING TO** the NBA's current rules, a player is guilty of goaltending if he touches the ball while it is inside an imaginary cylinder that extends upward from the rim, unless the ball is "rolling off the rim" with "no chance to go in." Aside from being needlessly convoluted, the rule squelches exciting plays and only leads to unnecessary controversies.

When Blake Griffin (*left*) crashes in for a putback dunk, frame-by-frame replays from a camera stationed directly behind the basket can't always produce conclusive evidence that he first touched the ball outside the cylinder. Making that decision from 20 feet away in real time? Good luck. The league's murky standard simply asks too much of the referees.

The NBA acknowledged that inherent difficulty and added goaltending to the list of calls reviewable under instant replay for the 2012-13 season. But the system has a fatal flaw: Only assessed goaltending calls can be reviewed. If the referees miss a blatant offense by Dwight Howard, there's no remedy, even if that oversight determined the game's outcome.

Before retiring in 2014, former commissioner David Stern unsuccessfully advocated for FIBA's goaltending rule: In international basketball there is no cylinder, and the ball is live after it hits the rim. Offensive rebounders can fearlessly chase second-chance slams, and defenders can try to bat the ball off the rim.

With this simpler, more intuitive approach, players are rewarded for athletic, well-timed feats; referees have one less thing to manage; and the league office sidesteps disputes over blown goaltending calls. Most important, NBA fans are treated to more above-the-rim challenges and fewer monotonous video reviews. It's time to heed Stern's advice and ditch the cylinder.

the first (and so far only) primary assist by a goaltender in overtime.

As Treiving says, no strategy "is too off-the-wall," at least in theory. Some moments of coaching courage, like Tampa Bay's Jon Cooper deploying three forwards at once or Washington's Barry Trotz ordering Alex Ovechkin to cherry-pick breakaways while his teammates defend 2-on-3, have thus far been limited to exhibition trial runs and meeting-room hypotheticals, too dicey for games that actually count. But they may emerge yet.

Other gambits have been less exceptional. Earlier this season the Flames took those players not marked for overtime duty and had them stand behind the bench, next to the coaches. "They

weren't going to get in, so we cleared room [on the bench]," Treiving says. "Every foot counts." Three teams have begun overtime with two defensemen and one forward, reversing the typical starting lineup: Washington, New Jersey and Calgary, whose five overtime wins lead the league, with Chicago and Detroit. Taking such a defensive posture could guard against a quick first strike or, in the case of the Flames, it could simply be a matter of using the team's best players. In a mid-November game in Edmonton, the Stanley Cup-champion Blackhawks sprang a mid-change magic trick on their hosts. As defenseman Brent Seabrook carried the puck deep in his defensive zone, teammate Artem Anisimov bolted to the

bench, signaling for a change. With all three Oilers preoccupied with Seabrook, Marian Hossa timed his entrance perfectly, hopping off the bench at the offensive blue line and taking a stretch pass in stride for the game-winning breakaway. "It's the ol', Where the heck did that guy come from?" Stars coach Lindy Ruff says.

The new 3-on-3 format change had similarly inconspicuous roots as an agenda item presented to the league's general managers several years ago, though at first it generated little buzz. But it thrived during a testing phase last year in the minor leagues, drew inspiration from an unusual decision in Scandinavia and will soon be used in a minitournament at the 2016 All-Star Game. By week's

end 55 of 81 overtimes (67.9%) had been resolved before the shootout, up from 40.1% (in 2012–13), 42.0% ('13–'14) and 44.4% ('14–'15). Of those 55 winners 11 were scored within the first minute of overtime, and more than half came on the rush. You can call it more gimmicky than its 4-on-4 predecessor, you can debate its merits as a method for settling outcomes, but concede this much: The NHL's concoction has sizzled while leaving skaters gassed, seatbacks empty and broadcasters breathless. It has, for now, resolved a shortcoming in the game while pumping it with entertainment value. (Other leagues could learn something: *see sidebars*). As Bill Simmons tweeted in October, "3 on 3 OT hockey is the greatest sports invention since the 3 point line."

Or, in the words of Flyers forward Jakub Voracek, "It's f---ing shotgun hockey. Just get out there and go."

**T**HE MAN who became shotgun hockey's most vocal advocate was sitting inside the media room at Boston's TD Garden last month, telling its story between bites of his pregame meal. "Here's what happened," Red Wings GM Ken Holland says. "The shootout is a way to bring the game to a conclusion, and it's an exciting way [to do it]. But we wanted to have more games decided in overtime. We wanted change." Holland first took up this cause several years ago at the general managers' meetings, a somewhat ironic position given that he had been one of two executives to vote against instituting the shootout in July 2005. "I guess we were a little traditionalist," Holland says, and yet here he was, sounding the horn for change.

Overtime, which went to 4-on-4 in 1999–2000, had undergone reform before but in small doses. Five years ago the league removed shootout victories from the playoff tiebreaking procedure, aiming to incentivize winning in OT. When the rate of tied games going to the shootout still hovered around 60%, the GMs voted to switch ends for overtime, creating a "long change" from a team's defensive zone to its bench. "Everybody agreed, if



MLS / *Modest Proposal*

## X-OUT PENALTY KICKS

BY GRANT WAHL

**SOCCER IS** a game about space: How to find it, how to use it, how to create it. You can master space with your skills, your intelligence and your athleticism. As such, space is the bedrock of the sport. That's something to keep in mind when considering my proposal for how to fix extra time in soccer in the most organic way possible: Increase the amount of space available on the field by having each team remove a player every five minutes in the extra period.

Want to know an *inorganic* way of breaking ties? Penalty kicks (*above*). As SI's Alexander Wolff once wrote, deciding a soccer game with penalty kicks is like asking Lincoln and Douglas to settle their debates with a belching contest. Soccer games should be decided by soccer. And as you remove players from the field, the space increases, and so do the chances for goals. Hockey fans, feel free to speak up here. By taking a player off every five minutes, a coach also has to make a fascinating tactical decision with the game on the line. Who do I really need here? It's easy to envision the second-guessing that would take place after a controversial coaching call.

But that's the thing: Those would be *soccer* debates in the way that ones about penalty kicks never are. Don't listen to anyone who tries to tell you there's some sort of sanctity to the penalty-kick shootout. There isn't. It's a dumb way to decide a game. Better to let the outcome be settled by space. Better to let it be determined by soccer.



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# NO MORE ONE-BATTER RELIEVERS

BY BEN REITER

**RANDY CHOATE**, the Cardinals' 40-year-old southpaw, appeared in 71 games last season. In 51 of them he pitched to only one batter, earning \$3 million for 27 $\frac{1}{3}$  innings of work.

Choate (*below*) was only the most prominent beneficiary of a tactical trend managers are embracing more than ever: using ultraspecialized relief pitchers. In 2015 there were 1,398 single-batter relief appearances, 132 more than in '14 and a 34% increase from a decade ago. The practice saps momentum from what ought to be the most exciting portion of games and hinders Major League Baseball's pace-of-play initiatives. During late innings of close games fans spend as much time watching new pitchers warm up as they do actual baseball.

What can be done? It's simple: Require relievers to pitch to multiple batters unless, perhaps, they successfully finish an inning having faced only one. A minimum of three batters would be ideal, but we'll start gently, with two.

The players' union might not be on board with anything that harms the careers of a certain genre of player. But it should be. What's good for Randy Choate is bad for baseball.



the long change didn't have a dramatic effect, we'd have serious conversations at the March 2015 meeting," Holland says. "There was a mood to try to do something other than just tweak it."

Before the 2014–15 season the American Hockey League's competition committee, made up largely of NHL assistant GMs, adopted a hybrid format for overtime—three minutes of 4-on-4 and then, at the first stoppage thereafter, 3-on-3. "It was really on an experimental basis to see what it did to decision rates," NHL deputy commissioner Bill Daly says. Around Christmas the Swedish Elite League also made the "very quick" and "very unusual" decision, as head of hockey operations Johan Hemlin wrote in an email, to change to 3-on-3 during the middle of the season. In both instances, the frequency of shootouts occurring plummeted almost 40%.

The NHL's general managers favored the hybrid model, but when the competition committee met in early June, the four players present—Winnik, New Jersey goaltender Cory Schneider, Devils forward Mike Cammalleri and St. Louis defenseman Kevin Shattenkirk—voiced concern over adding time to the clock. "If you do seven minutes, you're basically just hoping it gets to the 3-on-3 portion, so why not just do the full [five minutes at] 3-on-3?" Winnik says. Three weeks later, two days before the NHL draft, the board of governors stamped their approval.

Since the implementation of 3-on-3, however, a few protests have emerged. Some players wondered if overtime wins, like shootout victories, should also be removed from the first tiebreaker equation. Dubnyk has advocated for separate statistics for overtime, something the competition committee discussed but did not resolve. (Calgary's Johnny Gaudreau, Philadelphia's Claude Giroux and Voracek, each with eight OT points, would likely beg to differ.) "You hear guys saying it's not hockey, which is fine to say," Dubnyk says, "but if there is that separate category of 3-on-3 time, then I don't think people will worry as much about what it is, if it's hockey or if it's

not hockey." Karlsson called it "kind of boring," likening it to a bag skate, while Winnipeg defenseman Dustin Byfuglien ripped it, simply calling it "stupid."

"I hated the idea when they said it," says Niskanen, one of the two defensemen Washington starts in overtime. "It sounded weird to me. It felt cheesier than a shootout. But I've come around." Karlsson also recently admitted he may have judged too quickly.

At the league level, Daly says, the feedback has been positive. The decision to incorporate 3-on-3 into next month's All-Star Game—the format is a four-team tournament of 20-minute games of 3-on-3—required players' association approval and received little pushback. But whether the excitement and effectiveness of 3-on-3 stays steady, Daly and others predict, will largely depend upon the men charged with organizing the madness.

"It reminds me of 4-on-4 when we first put it in, in the early stages," says Peter DeBoer, in his first season helming the Sharks. "There's a lot of open ice, a lot of chances created, and I think we coached that out of it. Now it's going to be tough to eliminate all the chances of 3-on-3, but I don't see this having the same success rate as it goes along. It's our job to find out how to slow it down a little bit."

Will coaches whittle away the speed and muzzle shotgun hockey? Will more teams follow Washington and New Jersey in starting two defensemen as security blankets? Boston defenseman Torey Krug recalls one opponent deploying a zone defense to guard against getting burned in the usual man-to-man matchup. Niskanen recently suggested keeping two skaters above the hashmarks in the offensive zone to prevent breakaways from erupting in the opposite direction. Then, emptied of ideas, he wondered if the NHL had installed something unintentionally coach-proof. "I think you can coach anything to a degree," Holland says, "but sooner or later you're going to have a scoring chance. We've got the best in the world at what they do. And if you give them some time and space, they're going to do things that can bring you out of your seat." □



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## COLLEGE FOOTBALL

*RUNNING THE TRIPLE OPTION WITH APLOMB, QUARTERBACK KEENAN REYNOLDS HAS BECOME A TOUCHDOWN MAKER FOR THE AGES WHILE LEADING NAVY TO NEW HEIGHTS. NEXT UP: ARMY. (THEN INFORMATION WARFARE)*



**BY SOME** estimates as many as 500 of the 55,212 people who watched Navy play Memphis at Liberty Bowl Memorial Stadium on Nov. 7 had a personal connection to Keenan Reynolds, the Midshipmen's senior quarterback. His parents, Donnie and Jackie, were there, of course, as was his 10-year-old brother, Quentin. The family had made the three-hour drive from their hometown of Antioch, Tenn., to watch Keenan play college football for the first and last time in their home state. But no one could accurately count all the rest: extended-family members, friends from church, coaches and teammates from Goodpasture Christian School, old football pals of Donnie's from Tennessee-Martin.

They had come to see Reynolds play and continue Navy's best start to a season since 2004—the Midships were off to a 6–1 start, their only loss on the road to Notre Dame, 41–24. With slightly more than three minutes left and Navy holding a 38–20 lead over the unbeaten, 13th-ranked Tigers, a win wasn't in much doubt. But his supporters had also come to see Reynolds set an all-time FBS record for career rushing touchdowns. He had begun the afternoon tied with former Wisconsin tailback Montee Ball, at 77.

Reynolds hadn't scored yet, but with the ball at the one-yard line, it seemed his time had come.

# PITCH PERFECT

**BY BEN REITER**

Photograph by  
Ken Inness/ZUMAPRESS.com

## BATTLE TESTED

The Midshipmen are 30–13 with Reynolds at the helm, and win or lose against the Cadets, they will play in their fourth straight bowl game.

His coach, Ken Niumatalolo, and his offensive coordinator, Ivin Jasper, wanted him to get the record and put a rise into his escalating Heisman bid. They called a sneak. When the 5' 11", 205-pound Reynolds approached the line, though, he saw that his coaches' plans would come as no surprise to Memphis. Nine Tigers were in the box, and every gap was plugged. More than any other scheme, Navy's triple option hinges on the split-second decisions of its quarterback—to hand the ball off to the fullback, to pitch it to one of two wingbacks or to keep it—and Reynolds had ably and selflessly guided that attack, making the correct calls play in and play out for the better part of four years. Now, in the eyes of everyone screaming for him from the stands and on the sideline, it was time for Reynolds to do something for himself.

## SCORING MACHINE

Reynolds tied the TD record last week; he has two games to break it and hold off Dixon (chart, right).

**N**IUMATALOLO, A 50-year-old native of Hawaii, has a rare claim to fame: He is the all-time leader in victories at the same school that once fired him as its offensive coordinator. Niumatalolo often drives by the McDonald's near the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md., at which coach Charlie Weatherbie ambushed him over breakfast following the 1998 season. "I'd become a coordinator at 29, thought I had all the answers," Niumatalolo says.

The clash originated with Niumatalolo's steadfast belief in the triple option—the flexbone—that his mentor, Paul Johnson, had implemented at Georgia Southern. His faith in the attack eventually won out. In December 2001, Johnson succeeded Weatherbie as the Middies' coach and brought Niumatalolo back as the assistant head coach. In '07, when Johnson left for Georgia Tech, Niumatalolo took the reins.

The run-based, clock-chewing flexbone is particularly well-suited to Navy. It is complicated and requires selflessness, discipline and the ability to think quickly and analytically—all qualities that Midshipmen typically possess. It also presents an unusual look to defenses, adding an element of surprise that helps the service academy's players remain competitive even though they often can't match the athleticism of their opponents.

Reynolds proved one of those rare top-level recruits for whom Navy represented a perfect fit. Although bigger programs liked him at other positions, his size and his insistence on playing quarterback cut his genuine suitors to three: Navy, Air Force and Wofford. "I could have easily gone to a school like Wofford—great academics, played quarterback, who knows what would have happened," Reynolds says. "Have all the freedom in the world. Party, do whatever you want. I had fun on my visit. But when I was thinking about my decision, I was thinking about 20, 30 years down the road."

More immediately he had to transition from his high school shotgun spread to the triple option. It helped that he and



## THE RACE FOR THE COMBINED RUSHING-RECEIVING TD RECORD

KEENAN REYNOLDS, Navy, 2012-15	83
KENNETH DIXON, Louisiana Tech, 2012-15	83
MONTEE BALL, Wisconsin, 2009-12	83
TRAVIS PRENTICE, Miami (Ohio), 1996-99	78
RICKY WILLIAMS, Texas, 1995-98	75

Donnie, a safety in college, had been breaking down tapes of Keenan's games since he was nine. "A lot of dads talk about how they coached their sons, and you listen to them," says Niumatalolo. "Most of them don't know what they're talking about. Donnie does." Keenan became the starter for the sixth game of his freshman year. "We've had a lot of good option quarterbacks here," says Niumatalolo. "He's the best."

Choosing to attend Navy, though, meant more than grasping a complicated offense. Reynolds's disciplined personality allowed him to adapt to the academy's demands off the field as well. "Everybody talks about how his mama did such a good job raising him," says Jackie. "But the reality was, Keenan was easy. It's hard for me to accept credit when he's just always done the right thing."



LIFE  
HAPPENS  
IN



He arrived—on the dot—for a scheduled 11 a.m. interview on the day before Thanksgiving but admitted, “I’m always plotting when I can get a nap in.” At other FBS campuses, athletes reside in cushy, specially designed dorms; when Reynolds naps he does it on a twin bed, lofted above his desk, in a room that he shares with two other midshipmen. He has gotten to sleep more this semester because, he says, “academically, my load is a lot lighter than it has been in the past.”

That means Reynolds is currently taking only six classes: financial analysis, national security decision-making in the cyber age, politics of irregular warfare, political philosophy, sports economics and—to satisfy his physical-education requirement—tennis. “I think I’ve got good feet,” Reynolds says of his skills on the court. “That’s what saves me.” His tennis class had begun that morning at 6:45.

Those who support Reynolds’s Heisman candidacy point to the award’s character clause. “Winners epitomize great ability combined with diligence, perseverance and hard work,” the Heisman Trust’s mission statement reads, in part, and perhaps no college football player better embodies those last three attributes. But Reynolds’s ability shouldn’t be overlooked. The No. 22 Midshipmen, who are 9–2, rank near the bottom of the FBS in total possessions but are 17th in scoring at 37.5 points per game—a stunning efficiency that can be attributed to their quarterback. “He’s always getting us into the right play, and the ball always goes to the right person,” says Niumatalolo. And while Reynolds’s 1,093 rushing yards rank 36th in FBS, Navy is second with 330.1 yards per game on the ground thanks to the reads he makes on nearly every snap. He has thrown the ball only 84 times this year, but he has been intercepted just once.

In fact, Niumatalolo believes that Reynolds, who has a strong arm and runs 4.5 in the 40, is a potential NFL quarterback. “You look at someone like Russell Wilson,” says Niumatalolo. “I think if Keenan’s in the right system—Seattle stuff, Chip Kelly stuff—I think he could play in the league.”

Of course, a Midshipman is obligated to perform five years of service after graduation, unless he receives a special waiver. “I think every kid that puts on pads wants to play at the high-

est level,” Reynolds says. “It’s definitely a dream of mine. But I’m very aware of what I signed up for. I’m kind of taking it day by day. If the opportunity arises and I’m allowed to pursue it, then I will.” Two weeks ago Reynolds tweeted, “Got my first choice, Information Warfare!,” a postgraduation assignment that’s as techie and secretive as it sounds.

## MIDDIE GROUND

Reynolds posed with the last Navy quarterback to win the Heisman, Roger Staubach (1963), and Staubach’s grandson after the SMU win.



**“Every kid wants to play at the highest level,” says Reynolds. “It’s definitely a dream. But I’m very aware of what I signed up for.”**

In any event, he has a few things to take care of before focusing on his long-term future, particularly a date this Saturday afternoon at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia. Reynolds will try to win his fourth straight game over Army (4–7), and to give Navy an unprecedented 14th consecutive win over its rival. He might also have something to do that evening, in New York City, when the Heisman is awarded. If he is named a finalist, Navy plans to fly him to the ceremony by helicopter. “Yeah, it’d be pretty awesome,” he says, “but my first priority that day is Army-Navy, without a doubt.”

**K** EENAN REYNOLDS would become the FBS’s all-time leader in rushing touchdowns on a four-yard run in the first quarter of Navy’s game against SMU, on Nov. 14. In that Memphis game, Reynolds had checked out of the sneak. “I usually try to find the soft spot in a defense,” Reynolds explains. “There was no soft spot. So it was kind of a no-brainer to check to a toss play.”

Reynolds pitched the ball to senior running back Demond Brown, who sauntered in to cement a 45–20 victory. “What we called was a good play,” says Niumatalolo. “But he wanted the best play.”

In the stands Reynolds’s family was confused, until he explained after the game what had happened. “Actually, I felt prouder of the decision he made than I think I would have been if he had gotten the record,” says Jackie.

On the sideline Niumatalolo embraced the quarterback who had taken his offense, and Navy football, to renewed heights. Said Niumatalolo, into Reynolds’s ear, “That’s why you are who you are.” □





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**LOOKED AT** now, of course, the photograph is wondrous, symbolic, a bit of comfort in a cruel and random universe. Isn't it reassuring to think that some things are meant to be? That tradition, a code of behavior, can be passed on through one brief encounter? Even if you're left cold by the chest-beating lore of the Dallas Cowboys, this Instamatic image smacks of an innocence that, nowadays, pro football can rarely claim. It feels like the start of a childhood dream.

See: There's Tom Landry, squinty-eyed avatar of the pop-culture entity dubbed America's Team. It's November 1986, nine seasons removed from Landry's last Super Bowl title and two before he will be fired, and he has just emerged from the visitors' locker room at Washington's RFK Stadium. Before him are three brothers. The youngest is a four-year-old towhead who will grow up to be the greatest receiver in Cowboys history. He will embody all the will, smarts and hard-bitten dedication of "God's Coach"—and, just to complete the circle, in 2012 he will name his first daughter Landry.

The coach looks delighted too, even though the rival Redskins have just destroyed Dallas 41–14. This is the first clue that while, yes, every picture tells a story, it is often the wrong one. The second is that Landry—fedora planted firmly, topcoat buttoned as if he's stepping onto the five-o'clock train—seems barely aware of his spiritual heir; his huge hands rest on the shoulders of Jason Witten's older brothers, Ryan and Shawn, whose football careers will peak respectively in high school and college.

And Jason? While he's too young to apprehend Landry's stature, he knows that his is a Cowboys family, and he senses his mother's thrill; with this snap she's got her father's Christmas present. Indeed, here is one of the happiest moments the Witten clan will ever have. The worst of the fighting between Jason's parents, Eddie and Kim, lies in the future, with Eddie's increasingly erratic behavior and physical abusiveness.



# IT WOULD HURT MORE *NOT* TO PLAY

*Concussions, sprained joints, a broken jaw—no amount of pain can keep tight end Jason Witten, the greatest receiver in Cowboys history, from taking the field. It's just the way he was raised*

BY S.L. PRICE



Photograph by  
**RICH SCHULTZ**  
Getty Images





The Landry moment, in fact, came about partly because of one of Eddie's healthier interests. Before his troubles deepened and the family headed to Tennessee, the 6' 8", 300-pound mailman fostered a sports madness in the Wittens' Vienna, Va., condo, and finagled endlessly to feed it. The region's pro venues were old and porous then, so Eddie had little trouble moving his boys down from the cheap seats in Landover, Md., to gawk at the Bullets' 7' 7" Manute Bol, or working a connection to get into the dank hallways in Baltimore's Memorial Stadium just as Cal Ripken Jr. clattered by.

On fall Sundays, Eddie would follow up a morning of baseball, basketball and football drills with his sons by tracking the Redskins' score. At halftime the Wittens might race the 20 miles to RFK, where ushers sometimes let them in for free. Or they just hung near the players' parking lot, waiting for John Riggins or Art Monk to appear, whereupon Eddie sent the boys running for autographs.

In the bowels of a stadium, though, is where the man did his best work, maneuvering the boys close, persuading star after star to stop for a word or a handshake. "He had a way—I don't know if it was just because he was big," Jason says. "He was excited for us: 'You want to be that one day? Watch how they act, how they warm up. Watch how they carry themselves.'"

But the Landry photo, the one that resides in a box in a closet at Kim's house—Jason doesn't remember any of it: not his mom yelling about her family connection to former Cowboys linebacker Chuck Howley, not Landry's double-take and "Who said that?", not the coach's warm greeting and the flashbulb's explosion. Jason was just a child, standing at a slight remove. His chin is up, his jaw set, just enough to hint at the man he will become, the one who says, "I'm just going to be tougher—mentally, physically—to where you can't break me."

Not that the world hasn't tried.

**"ESPECIALLY THIS SEASON, HE FEELS LIKE HE'S THE LAST MAN STANDING," SAYS RYAN. "HE WANTS THAT FRANCHISE AND THOSE PLAYERS TO KNOW THAT HE CAN BE DEPENDED ON."**

**W**HEN SHE HEARD the news, Michelle Witten was fresh out of yoga class—mind clear, muscles stretched, her frazzled self *this* close to getting right again. Then some guy on the car radio boomed, "Guess who was out on the practice field today?" and before he could answer she knew, and an ungodly noise—equal parts groan and bellow—spilled out of her mouth. She thought, *Are you serious?! Can't you have more sense?*

This was in late September, three days after her husband sprained both ankles and his left knee during the Cowboys' 20–10 win at Philadelphia. Adrenaline and tape had carried Jason Witten through the final quarter, but by late Sunday both ankles had ballooned beyond recognition, a study in purple and blue. He couldn't walk. He didn't sleep all night, and what with fetching and setting ice bags, Michelle didn't either.

Monday morning the 6' 6", 263-pound Witten could put no weight on his legs, and he showed up at the team's training facility on crutches. An MRI confirmed the damage: high ankle and deltoid sprains in his left leg; a lesser lateral sprain of his right ankle; a Grade 2 sprain of his left MCL. When he hobbled home late that afternoon, Michelle said, "Babe, there's nothing to prove. Why don't you just not play this week?"

That was new. Ever since Michelle, as a senior cheerleader at Elizabethton (Tenn.) High, asked Jason, a towering sophomore, if she could wear his football jersey, she had rarely played the overprotective partner. Save for the time a jaw broken in three places sidelined Jason for one week as a Cowboys rookie ("It's just your *jaw*," Michelle said as she drove Jason, spitting blood into a cup, to the hospital), he has played every game of his 13-year NFL career: 198 straight and counting. The three concussions and 28 other injuries to tissue and bone that Jason has suffered concerned Michelle, of course, and the lacerated spleen he endured in 2012 made her all but beg him to sit out, but for the most part she assessed his damage coolly, almost casually. Her nine-year stint dealing with gunshot wounds, heart attacks and car-wreck carnage as a nurse at Dallas's Parkland Memorial Hospital hadn't left Michelle hard, exactly; some nights she came home in tears. But she knew better than most wives what the human body—and her husband—could take, and she loved how she and Jason pushed beyond the point where most people give in. "I'm mentally tough," she says. "We're both crazy together."

Just to test herself, Michelle gave birth to the second of their four children, Cooper, without painkillers. Then, after her water broke for Landry, she did it again. Yes, she hears Jason's 33-year-old joints cracking when he climbs stairs. But she saw too much in the ER to worry about football's long-term effects on body and brain. "It could end tomorrow," she says. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but people get Alzheimer's anyway. It's life. This is the risk we're choosing."







## JASON WITTEN

Maurer over. “You know,” Witten said, “if we get some of this tape off, I think I’m going to be all right.”

After participating in the walk-through, Witten spent four hours that night icing. And less than 36 hours after he had left the house unable to walk, Michelle too knew that he would play. Suddenly, as if a switch inside her had been thrown, she loved the idea. “I’m like, *Yessss!*” Michelle says, slow-pumping a fist. “Isn’t that sick?”

**N**O. OR YES . . . if we view Michelle’s case as just one in a nationwide epidemic. Because we all say that we’re concerned about studies relating football to brain trauma. We *tsk-tsk* at the stories and documentaries about 50-year-old NFL legends who can barely walk, talk or think straight. We accuse the league of culpability, praise its new tackling rules and injury protocols, and rethink whether we should let our kids play. Yet Witten received the biggest ovation at AT&T Stadium when his face flashed on the massive video board during the national anthem that Sunday, and he warmed old-school hearts by playing every down and making six catches for 65 yards in a brutal 39–28 loss. Maurer still can’t say what keeps Witten going. “I wish I knew,” he says. “I’d bottle it. He’s unique. There’s 20 guys on this team right now who, if they’d had one of those injuries, wouldn’t have played.”

Two weeks later Witten rolled into a game against the Patriots leading all tight ends with 25 receptions, few of them breathtaking. No one speaks of the 10-time Pro Bowler as redefining his position—like New England’s freakish Rob Gronkowski, who has scored as many touchdowns in six seasons (63 through Week 11) as Witten has in 13, or the Chargers’ indefatigable Antonio Gates, who at 35 has scored 103. This pass-happy era features tight ends like never before, but Witten’s 11,010 career yards, second only to Tony Gonzalez’s 15,127, reflect the template forged by Mike

### MULTIPLE THREAT

*Besides being a great receiver and runner, Witten is a crack pass-blocker and knows every other player’s assignment.*



Still, risk after the Eagles game just felt . . . unnecessary. Dallas had lost star receiver Dez Bryant for six to eight weeks when he broke his right foot in the season opener, then in Philadelphia quarterback Tony Romo went down for seven games with a broken left collarbone. (Romo reinjured the collarbone on Thanksgiving and is out for the season.) Witten’s tender legs would now be an issue all season; nobody, Michelle argued that Monday evening, would blame him for resting up for a second-half push. “Yeah,” Jason said, seeming to agree. “I cannot even walk.”

But there were a few things Michelle didn’t know. On the team plane on Sunday night, Jason had told trainer Jim Maurer, “I’m going to be fine. You got me?”

“We can treat this,” Maurer replied. “I think you will be fine.”

Also, Witten’s reputation for quick healing carried its own pressure; everyone in the organization expected him to be in uniform the following Sunday against the Falcons. “One hundred percent confidence,” says third-string tight end James Hanna. “He’s just different. If it’s physically possible—and sometimes maybe when it isn’t—he’s going to find a way, and he’s going to play well.”

Lastly, Jason was barely listening to Michelle, though he trusts her more than anyone else. “I already had, in my mind, my plan,” he says.

That Monday evening he endured 2½ hours of deep tissue massage. Another sleepless night ensued, all ice bags and restlessness. Before he left the house on Tuesday morning—still on crutches—for treatment at Valley Ranch, Jason told Michelle, “I think I’ll take Wednesday off too.” But at 9:22 p.m. he texted his mother, grandmother and two brothers a photo of his swollen legs with the caption, *when you get two ankle sprains, and you’re trying to grind to get back on sunday. . .*

“Especially this season, he feels like he’s the last man standing,” says Ryan Witten, five years Jason’s elder. “He wants that franchise and those players to know that he can be depended on.” So Jason didn’t take Wednesday off—as Michelle soon heard. Maurer’s crew reduced the swelling to almost nothing, taping his legs mummy-tight, and Witten dropped into a stance a few times, launched and planted and cut. Hellish pain shot up his legs. Then he called

Ditka. Witten is low-altitude, rock-solid: the tight end you take home to mother. “His durability has been remarkable,” Pats coach Bill Belichick said the Tuesday before the game. Citing Witten’s run- and pass-blocking, great hands and clutch play, Belichick declared, “He does it all.”

Even coming from one of the game’s celebrated hard-liners, such hosannas seem inadequate. Witten’s signature moment came against the Eagles in 2007, after he caught a pass and was hit and his helmet popped off. He shrugged and then chugged, bareheaded, 25 more yards before being taken down. Such resilience has a cartoonish quality—Wile E. Coyote getting up after an anvil drops on his noggin—that all but demands overstatement. “Witten’s a certified war daddy,” says Dallas defensive end Jeremy Mincey. “He’s the epitome of what football is.”

“Jason’s like the old Wild West: the cowboy who rides in,” Romo says.

The latest in a line of iconic Dallas tight ends—Ditka, Billy Joe Dupree, Jay Novacek—Witten broke the franchise’s all-time receiving record in 2012. But his longevity may well be most significant: Witten broke defensive tackle Bob Lilly’s team record of 196 consecutive games on Nov. 22, at Miami.

Witten likes to say that he plays only if he feels he can perform at the highest level. But in truth, he would have taken the field against Atlanta in traction. “Yes, but not for a streak,” he says. “I truly believe I have a job to do. To think that there’s a sprain, and in a week it’s going to feel better? No—why can’t it feel better now? Your mind can go places. If you’ve got a broken clavicle, there’s nothing you can do. But I’ve been fortunate. When I’ve had injuries where there’s nothing structurally wrong and I know it’s just about gutting through? I have the ability to say, ‘Get better. I’m good.’”

Ability? Better to say family imperative. Two years ago Ryan was an assistant coach at the middle school opener in Elizabethton when he tore



#### FAMILY TRADITION

*Emulating Landry (top right) and Rider (far right), Witten (with Michelle and the kids) aims to be a good man on and off the field.*



an Achilles tendon celebrating a first-half touchdown. He refused a trainer’s offer of a walking boot, then dragged himself up and down the sideline through the rest of regulation and three overtimes. “I’ll be all right,” he said.

Then there was the time in 2001 that Shawn, Jason’s older brother by two years, broke his right fibula playing wide receiver at Virginia Tech. Writhing in the grass, he begged to be allowed to stand, because that’s the Witten Way: You leave the field under your own steam. He swears

he saw his grandfather’s face barking, “Get up, boy! Get up! You’ve got to walk off!”

Shawn stood. The leg buckled, and out came the cart. That night he called his mom, terrified, and said, “Please tell Pap I tried to walk off. Tell him I’m sorry, but I just couldn’t. I tried, I tried, I tried.”

**S**OME SAY that Dave Rider had softened by the time his Witten grandsons came into his life. Maybe, but the old stories still hovered: How if you got carried off the field during Dave’s playing days at Big Creek High in War, W.Va., in the early 1950s, you never got out there again. How Dave played his junior year on two broken ankles. How his right knee was totaled—cartilage, ligaments, bone—in the spring of freshman year at West Virginia, and after a doctor said he’d never play again, Dave shed a hip-to-toe cast that July and didn’t miss a start.

He played both ways for the Mountaineers, at running back and defensive back. When college ended Rider worked a decade in the mines, loading coal on top of coaching. Football was his joy. He coached 40 years of high school in Virginia and Tennessee, had only one kid quit, won 250-plus games. By the time all three of his grandsons were living in Elizabethton, in 1993, the town had no bigger name. “There was a reverence and fear of Coach Rider,” says his former player Mike Morrell, now an assistant basketball coach at Texas, “that felt like it shook the ground.”

At school his grandsons called him Coach. At home with his wife, Deanna, Dave was different: loving and open. In quiet moments he spoke of how he’d never known his own dad. The boys would sit with him while he studied game film and ride with him the five miles to school, so, yes, they learned quickly that you played with a busted nose. But they also learned to call their elders *sir* or



*ma'am*, to open doors for women, to treat wives and children like treasure.

They needed that. According to all involved, the marriage between Dave's daughter, Kim, and Eddie Witten had become a war zone by the late '80s; Kim and the two oldest boys, especially, were victims of Eddie's alcohol and drug abuse. "You never knew what was going to come home," says Kim, now Kim Barnett after remarrying in 2006. "If he was drinking, he was mean. If he was using something else, the house could burn down around him and he wouldn't care."

Jason says he can't remember his father laying a hand on him, but he witnessed abuse of his mother and Ryan. Mostly, Eddie's rage left Jason bewildered: *Didn't we have fun at an Orioles game two days ago?* "I was stuck there, and I saw my dad do some horrific things to people I love," Jason says. "It was a tale of two different men. Like, *Who is this guy?*"

At 12, Ryan was pushed into adulthood: shepherding his brothers upstairs when things got heated, getting between his parents, taking blows. More than once Ryan called the police to their Vienna home. One time while driving, Eddie launched a backhand that broke Kim's nose. She says it was because one boy had forgotten his shoes; Eddie says it was because he was angry over getting lost. "I asked her to read a map, and she didn't want to do it," Eddie says,

## EDDIE'S RAGE LEFT JASON BEWILDERED: "I SAW MY DAD DO SOME HORRIFIC THINGS TO PEOPLE I LOVE. IT WAS A TALE OF TWO DIFFERENT MEN. LIKE, WHO IS THIS GUY?"

"so I slapped her right there." From the backseat, the older boys saw blood. "Jason was screaming, but he was so young he didn't know," Kim says. "He was screaming because Ryan and Shawn were screaming."

When Ryan began skipping school, in 1991, Kim sent him to live with her parents in Elizabethton, to play football for her dad. On Ryan's spring break visit to Vienna, in '93, the family was driving down I-95 when Eddie flared up, pulled over and made Kim get out of the car. Ryan jumped out, with 12-year old Shawn and 10-year-old Jason trailing. The four trudged to the nearest exit, where a state trooper picked them up and drove them home. "That was the day I knew," Kim says.

One morning that June, Shawn and Jason woke up expecting to make their usual walk to school. As soon as Eddie left for work, Kim told them to pack. "Didn't tell our friends goodbye, didn't tell our Pee-Wee coaches goodbye, didn't even tell our teachers goodbye," Shawn says. "We were just gone."

Once they all moved into the house Kim had grown up in, the boys began feeling like a family again: meals together, church, a steady voice in charge. Rider never bad-mouthed their dad. When Jason cried for Eddie, Ryan consoled him most. "Trust me," he'd say. "This is the way it's *supposed* to be."

Ryan, small but fiercely committed, became a headhunting defensive back for Elizabethton High; if Coach Rider told him to take on five opponents single-handed, he wouldn't ask why. "He saved my life," Ryan says. Shawn and Jason, water boys for the Cyclones, went everywhere with their older brother—movies, the weight room, even on dates. They'd throw a football for hours in the backyard with its steep slope, Jason fetching the misses. You develop good hands that way.

The first year Eddie came to take the youngest boys for a weekend or holiday. Jason lived for those visits, but soon the disappointments piled up, and he saw why Eddie made everyone else so bitter. "And I eventually learned on my own—he stopped showing up . . . he's not coming . . . wait, he talked to mom like *that?*"

Jason says. "My dad *showed* me, which in turn allowed me to appreciate all the good that was coming into my life."

But if his grandfather set the example for manhood, Ryan modeled the way forward. He stayed upbeat, even when forced to sit out his freshman year over a residency technicality or as people openly wondered if he played only because he was Coach Rider's kin. Then, as Ryan bounced among three small colleges, Shawn emerged as perhaps the greatest player in Elizabethton history, a quarterback, wide receiver and defensive back who was named all-state three times. Jason sprung up to 6' 4", the fastest Witten of all, a soon-to-be high school All-America at linebacker. "But Ryan was never jealous," Jason says. "My junior and senior year he was my biggest fan, last person I'd see before I went on the field: 'Go get 'em today, man, they can't stop you!' That's what you want your big brother to do."

Still, it took a while for Jason to soak up his grandfather's core value. He missed the first three games of his junior year with a cracked ankle, figuring that the injury all but killed his chance at a college scholarship. One afternoon, thinking his grandmother would be a sympathetic ear, he complained about the unfairness and the pain.

"Jason, I want you to give up that football," Deanna finally said. "It's an awful tough sport."

"Mamaw, I can't just give it up," Jason sputtered.

"Well, then get out there," Deanna said, "and quit alibiing."

**R**OOKIE YEAR, fourth game: Already the Cowboys are looking to Witten to bail them out. This matters, considering the fierce debate within the organization over whether to take him in the 2003 draft. Some had pushed hard for UCLA tight end Mike Seidman, but new coach Bill Parcells stood firm: He wanted Witten, whose numbers at Tennessee weren't as eye-catching but who had switched from defensive end his freshman year

and produced three standout seasons in SEC hellfire, never missing a down. (Seidman, taken seven picks later in the third round by the Panthers, would be out of the NFL in four years.)

Now it's early in the fourth quarter; Dallas has third-and-11 on its own three-yard line. Witten hauls in a Quincy Carter pass over the middle and is cracked so hard on the right side of his head by Cardinals linebacker Ronald McKinnon—who will later be fined \$7,500 by the NFL—that his jaw is fractured in two spots on the right side and sheared loose on the left.

Witten jogs off the field, of course, but on reaching the sideline crumples to his knees, blood streaming into the turf. Even as his face swells like a bullfrog and he undergoes X-rays under Texas Stadium, his only thought is of Parcells hearing the news and sneering, “What do you mean, he’s not coming back in?”

They were made for each other. Parcells, the coach who delighted in ignoring any player who showed signs of fatigue, studied the great tight end Russ Francis as a defensive assistant with New England, and then as coach of the Giants and the Pats he developed standouts Mark Bavaro and Ben Coates. Parcells baited Witten on his toughness, calling him out in film sessions: “I forgot, Witten! You don’t run down on kickoffs—just want to catch passes. You’re everybody’s All-American! Blond, blue-eyed farm boy...”

Witten showed up at Valley Ranch three days after his injury with three metal plates screwed into his jaw, a four-to-six-week recovery in mind. Parcells greeted him with a jar of sweet-potato baby food and the story of how Bavaro broke his jaw and played the same night. He told Witten to keep his weight up: Drop and you’ll be fined and on my s--- list. Witten missed one game, lost 15 pounds and panicked. He slipped a five-pound sandbag into his shorts, made weight, played the next week against Detroit.

Later that season Dave Rider visited

## PARCELLS BAITED WITTEN ON HIS TOUGHNESS: “I FORGOT, WITTEN! YOU DON’T RUN DOWN ON KICKOFFS—JUST WANT TO CATCH PASSES. YOU’RE EVERYBODY’S ALL-AMERICAN!”

Valley Ranch. Witten ginned up his courage and asked if his grandfather could attend practice. Parcells said yes and even sat with Rider for half an hour, telling tales, gathering intelligence. At the end the old man said, “Jason’s a good boy, but if he needs a kick right in the ass, you give it to him. If that doesn’t work, call me.”

Parcells crowed that he now had “carte blanche” to make Witten’s life miserable. Witten didn’t care. How many chances did he have to pay his grandpa back? “I’ve wanted to meet him a long time, Jason,” Rider softly said of Parcells in the car afterward. “Thank you for that.”

Coaches love coach-raised kids. The boys don’t grow up hearing mindless praise at home, Parcells says, and they can’t help but learn the game in toto. Witten’s ability to read defensive shifts, and not only for himself, is uncanny: Often, while in motion, he barks out new blocking assignments to running backs. Coaches correcting his adjustments usually end up red-faced. “I’ll look at tape, and 99.9% of the time Jason’s decision was right,” Romo says. “Outside of the quarterback room? He would be the next guy you’d tell, ‘O.K., you can go in and play QB and understand the concepts, the hots, the sights, all the simplistic yet difficult things that you need to know.’ It’s rare.”

In Cowboys training camp in July, veterans were charged with lecturing the team on one of their most important plays. Witten chose 595 Y-Option, his trademark route, which saved the Cowboys’ winning drive against the Lions in the 2014 playoffs. In the play Witten runs 10 yards from scrimmage, reads the defender’s lean and hooks outside or in. Nine times out of 10 he veers outside.

Witten began by breaking down the play into eight segments. Half of them—what he’s thinking, how he fixes his eyes, how his weight is distributed, how he releases from his stance—covered just the first two steps. “The most detailed, thorough coaching demonstration I have ever seen,” says Cowboys coach Jason Garrett.

Then Witten rolled the clip of his glory moment, the fourth-and-six conversion against Detroit with six minutes left. And though he had taken everyone by surprise with a textbook fake outside and instead cut in—and made the 21-yard catch that keyed the Cowboys’ first postseason win in five years—Witten didn’t dwell on that. Instead he pointed out how Dez Bryant’s presence had forced the Lions into Cover 2, how left guard Ronald Leary all but shanghaied tackle Ndamukong Suh to give Romo just half a second more, how receivers Cole Beasley and Terrance Williams stretched the secondary to open up Witten’s matchup with safety James Ihedigbo, and what each of the six other Cowboys did to make his feat possible. “He put it all the way back into team,” Garrett says. “How they made it happen.”

Don’t mistake that for unselfishness. “Jason wants *all* the balls,” says Cowboys owner Jerry Jones. Though known as a generous tutor, Witten took the drafting of tight ends Anthony Fasano in 2006 and Martellus Bennett in ’08 as threats. When Garrett inserted one blocking play for Bennett in the game plan







## JASON WITTEN

the doctor “advised Jason he could play. . . . He was very convincing.”

Isom has a different recollection. He says he told Jones that his lack of recent trauma experience rendered him less than qualified to judge. While Witten’s injury was barely visible on the latest scan—Isom says it was more bruise than laceration—he also recalls saying that if he had seen the same in an auto-accident victim, “I wouldn’t say go back and get in another car wreck—and that’s what you’re doing every Sunday.” He adds, “I didn’t clear [Jason], and Jerry just said thank you and left. I didn’t know till the next day that he played, because I watched the game.”

Witten caught two passes for 10 yards that Sunday and after a slow start pieced together perhaps his best season: a tight-end-record 110 catches and a fourth 1,000-yard season. That sealed his ironman rep, but “what really separates Jason is his pursuit of doing *everything* the right way,” Garrett says. “Every pass-set, walk-through, motion: His eyes are right. There’s never a frivolous moment.”

**T**HAT GARRETT says this while pointing to a PURSUE EXCELLENCE cup is no accident: Witten has become a living bromide, the perfect example. So here’s another question: Why? “I think Jason lives his life trying to please,” Michelle says, and what could please coaches, fans and teammates more than dependability? “More than anybody,” Romo says, “Jason doesn’t want anyone—a coach or father figure or wife or best friend—to think that he *can’t* do something.”

Add family to Romo’s list. Witten is determined to be there for his four kids—“constant in their life,” as he puts it—in a way his father wasn’t. While limping about, bleary-eyed, on his ankle and knee sprains in October, he still drove the children to school, still woke up at 5:30 a.m. on Saturday, his usual sleep-in day, to write his nine-

for the ’09 opener, Witten didn’t speak to him for a week.

That came after a punishing 2008, during which Witten played through a separated shoulder, torn rib cartilage, a broken rib, a vicious hit to the jaw and a high ankle sprain. He still finished with 81 catches for 952 yards, but “injury-prone” is not a label he wanted to stick. So he told Maurer that if he had any ailment that was less than crippling, he should be reported to team officials as fine. Come the Wednesday walk-through, he’d make sure he was ready to go.

**L**ET’S STOP for a question. Jason Witten is a hero in Dallas, not least because he takes so much punishment, and considering the most influential man in his life, the former players he most respects, his love of competition, the organization that pays his \$5.1 million salary, and all the newspapers, TV crews and, yes, magazines that find his endurance endlessly fascinating, he has little room for a voice advocating restraint. But it bears asking: Is football worth dying for?

Because, once, that’s what it came down to. After Witten suffered a lacerated spleen in the first preseason game of 2012, he vowed to play in the opener 23 days later, against the Giants. This was not a sprain or bone bruise; even a laceration as small as his—three centimeters—can cause blood to drain into the abdomen. At the time medical practice dictated six to eight weeks of rest before resuming strenuous activity. Maurer, Kim, Dave, Michelle, the team doctor and a surgeon all advised Jason to stand down.

Michelle sent Jason’s CT scan to a trauma surgeon at Parkland. “I don’t know anyone who’s going to clear you [to play],” the doctor told Jason. (He also noticed two healed—but previously undiagnosed—cracked ribs.) Michelle had seen plenty of spleen trauma. She knew that one hit could reopen Jason’s wound, perhaps cause a full rupture. Worse, he could be hit during the Giants game, feel fine but have the wound reopen on the flight home due to modulations in air pressure. “That was the scariest,” she says. “I did not want him to play, and I was very vocal; I knew he could die in an airplane. He could bleed out and not even know.”

But Witten felt good. Reports at the time stated that he finally received clearance from O. Wayne Isom, then chairman of cardiothoracic surgery at New York City’s Weill Cornell Medical Center. Jones, who had flown Witten there on his private jet and accompanied him to two evaluations with Isom, says that

### THE PLEASER

*Fear of disappointing Parcells (opposite) and his teammates led Witten to take risks such as running without his helmet.*



year-old son, C.J., a three-page birthday letter. At a laser-tag party the night before, plans had to be made to protect Jason from himself. “I don’t want to tempt Dad,” C.J. told his mom. “I’m not going to put him on my team. I don’t want him to hurt his ankle anymore.”

In 2007, Witten created the Scorekeepers Program to assist families roiled by domestic violence. The initiative, which spread to six Texas battered-women’s shelters and includes four learning centers in Texas and Tennessee, also provides for six full-time male counselors and is estimated to have touched the lives of 5,000 children “whether they’ve been abused or not,” Witten says, “because they’ve seen it. Their life has been disrupted, much like mine was—and probably a lot worse. The purpose was to provide a resource for these kids. To be a male mentor. To be Dave Rider. To be there to inspire, to push, to hug, to listen.”

When he first told his mom about this, she cried; Kim Barnett’s pride in “the man, husband and father Jason has become” couldn’t be clearer. Ryan calls his little brother “my hero,” and Shawn, who now has Rider’s old job as Cyclones coach, regularly invokes Jason’s name at Elizabethton High, which is located at 907 Jason Witten Way. Jason is the family achievement, made only more impressive when you realize that family troubles don’t stop with the signing of an NFL contract.

In June 2008, Barnett pleaded guilty in Elizabethton on 25 felony counts of forgery for withdrawing, over eight months, \$5,465 from a local woman’s bank account. Jason’s mother, sentenced to 30 days in jail and four years’ probation, told the court she was trying to cover the last costs of Ryan’s degree in physical education at nearby Milligan College. She has paid the money back.

Four days later Jason hosted, as he has since 2003, his annual SCORE Foundation football camp in Elizabethton for 1,200 kids. “I just felt like I needed to be that piece that would keep it all together,” he says. “That was my

“WHAT REALLY SEPARATES JASON IS HIS PURSUIT OF DOING *EVERYTHING* THE RIGHT WAY,” GARRETT SAYS. “THERE’S NEVER A FRIVOLOUS MOMENT.”



grandparents’ daughter, and they’re hurt. They’re living in that town, respected in that town. So even though it is strange or awkward at times, I always feel like I need to be the one who does.”

Two years later Ryan, then the coach at John S. Battle High in Bristol, Va., was charged in Elizabethton with his second DUI in three years. Ryan resigned his high school position in February 2011, and his driver’s license was suspended for a year the following May. Not long after, Kim was driving him to work when Ryan said, “I’m heading down the road my dad was on, aren’t I?”

Jason is sure that Ryan, as the oldest, suffered the most from Eddie’s abuse. “There was a long time there that I worried about him,” Jason says. He kept send-

ing his big brother the message: *That name on the back of my jersey on Sundays? You’re the reason. You’re a huge part of this.* In 2013, Ryan began working for Shawn, coaching at Elizabethton’s middle and high schools. He reconnected with his high school girlfriend and got married. He began a personal coaching business for kids ages five to 18 and vowed to let his twisted feelings toward his dad finally die.

Eddie, who served six months in 2002–03 for unlawfully wounding his 72-year-old mother, surfaces in his sons’ lives from time to time. He lives not far from Elizabethton, and for a while he showed up, nervously, at Jason’s football camp until Jason finally said, “I forgive you, what you did.” Relations became civil, if not warm.

But in October 2014, ESPN’s *E-60* produced a piece on Jason and interviewed Eddie, who said he remembered being abusive “maybe once or twice” but denied being violent with Kim or his sons. The family was irate. “He had a chance to make it right,” Jason says, “and he lied.” (“I have to admit to that,” Eddie says. “How can I lie and say, ‘I didn’t hit my wife’ on national TV? I didn’t know what to say.”)

Jason called Eddie, livid. The following Sunday, after a 20–17 overtime loss to the Redskins, Jason was walking out of the locker room at AT&T Stadium when he heard his name called. Even as he turned he thought, *How did he get down here?* It hit him: Eddie always had a way. So Jason stopped, and there they were again, in the dim echoing hall under a stadium. What was it his dad used to say? *You want to be that someday.* Now Jason was the player, cornered, and Eddie was getting him to shake hands with a random guy.

Some see that as the night Jason gave up on his father for good, but he shrugs it off. “Moving forward, being positive,” he says. No, football’s toughest man cracks just once a year, and it is always the same: The Cowboys’ season ends, and the locker room door closes. The pressure to endure and win and be the family rock and team rock and scared kids’ rock lifts, just enough, and Jason Witten begins to cry. He peels the tape. He shucks his pads. He showers and dresses, crying still. □



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# Mamba, Out

→ BY LEE JENKINS

**THREE SEASON-ENDING INJURIES** ago Kobe Bryant sat in an empty weight room at the Lakers' practice facility when a Mariano Rivera highlight flashed on the television. The Yankees' closer was relishing a farewell tour and Bryant was rehabbing a torn Achilles tendon. As part of his therapy he used his toes to manipulate a towel with a two-and-a-half-pound silver weight on the end. He looked up only at the sight of Rivera striking out a hopeless Met. "How do you know when it's your time?" Bryant asked. He was genuinely curious, as if awaiting a sign directing him home to Newport Beach.

On Sunday night he answered his own question. When Phil Jackson coached the Lakers, he taught the team to meditate, but Bryant was never very good at it. His mind drifted to basketball. Now that Jackson runs the Knicks, Bryant still meditates, and his mind still drifts. But recently he noticed it wandering to places other than hoops.

There were so many earlier cues—the ruptured Achilles, then the fractured kneecap, finally the ravaged rotator cuff—but the great ones are always the last to notice. Self-belief empowers and blinds. Bryant's body told him he was finished, and when he didn't get the message, his skills joined the chorus. Bryant struggled to understand why Rivera, confounding hitters with his cutter in the summer of 2013, would choose to retire. But in this, the fall of '15, the 37-year-old Bryant's elaborate pump fakes fooled nobody.

In a few years we won't remember 1 for 14 against the Warriors, 6 for 22 against the Blazers, 3 for 15 against the Mavericks. We will only remember 81 against the Raptors, 65 against the Blazers, 62 against the Mavs, because those are the performances that will rerun on TV. The NBA has seen more balanced players than Bryant, but this is a league defined by stars, and few were more captivating. The Lakers, at 2–14 through Sunday, remain the biggest road draw in the NBA. Their cheapest home tickets on StubHub run roughly five times the cost of comparable Clippers seats. They have more Twitter followers than the Knicks, Celtics and Warriors combined. That's the residue of Showtime, but also the allure of Bryant. When he announced on Sunday that this will be his last season, via a poem on The Players' Tribune, the site crashed.

Bryant  
could never  
ease into a  
supporting  
role, so he  
leaves  
the  
picture  
entirely.  
"It's the  
cycle," he  
said after  
announcing  
he will  
retire.  
"There's no  
sadness  
in that."



What's the  
highlight  
of Bryant's  
career?

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discussion on  
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Those who thought Bryant's verse was dramatic must have missed the gold foil-stamped letter presented in black envelopes to every fan attending the Pacers-Lakers game at Staples Center that night. "Some of you took me in," the missive begins. "Some of you didn't." It was emotional. It was over the top. It was Kobe. When he drilled a three-pointer with 12 seconds left, you wondered if he had another year left in him, and when he air-balled a second three from the same spot five seconds later, you remembered that he did not. Bryant laughed at the turnabout. More poetry. He finished 4 for 20 in yet another loss, and afterward, Indiana guard George Hill hugged him. Then Hill hugged him again.

The end, for Bryant, was never going to be elegant. There are few graceful ways to handle an immortal's exit and the Lakers tried, perhaps too hard. Two years ago they rewarded Bryant's loyalty with a ludicrous \$48.5 million contract extension, bonding a famously impatient five-time champion with a rebuilding roster. "Awkward," general manager Mitch Kupchak admitted. Kupchak's son, Maxwell, was born two nights before Bryant made his NBA debut. Maxwell is now a freshman at UC Santa Barbara. How do you cut a player who defined a generation?

Bryant could never ease into a supporting role, so he leaves the picture entirely. "It's the cycle," he said on Sunday. "There's no sadness in that. I see the beauty in not being able to blow past defenders. I see the beauty in getting up in the morning and being in pain. I'm not sad about it. I'm appreciative of what I've had."

Jerry West, the former Lakers GM who scouted Bryant in a workout at Inglewood High 20 years ago, once told him, "Don't play beyond your time." Maybe he did, maybe he didn't. What matters is he finally figured out that his time had come. □



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